
1
Sword of the Stallion
Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako


1
Sword of the Stallion
Gakuto Mikumo


Illustration by Manyako

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1 The Stallion Knight Is Ordered to Seduce a Princess of the Neighboring Kingdom

CHAPTER 2 The Stallion Knight Reunites with His Ex-Fiancée

CHAPTER 3 The Stallion Knight Riles Up Central Command

CHAPTER 4 The Stallion Knight Unleashes His Over Arts

CHAPTER 5 The Stallion Knight Encounters a Legendary Chasseur

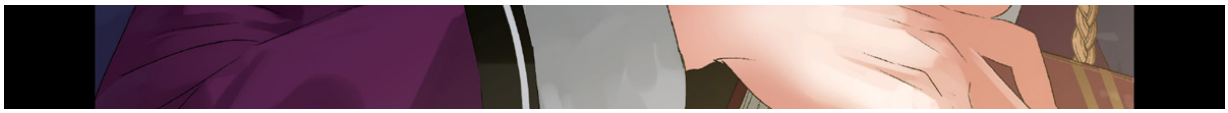
CHAPTER 6 The Stallion Knight Infiltrates the Kingdom

EPILOGUE

BONUS TALE The Melancholy of a Cross-Dressing Princess

AFTERWORD


Ras
Talion
Veredica
“I want you to seduce a princess.”
Auriol
Ref
Argenteia




Key Terms
Auramancy
Powered by aura, a form of spiritual energy, this technique produces powerful effects through the manipulation and transmutation of matter into other forms and substances. It is best thought of not as magic but as an advanced form of alchemy.
Aura Knight
A person who uses auramancy to fight. Despite the seemingly formal title, the term applies to commoners and nobility alike.
Chasseur d'Acier
A nine-meter-tall humanoid fighting machine that mankind developed in order to combat fiends. It takes the form of an enormous suit of armor with mechanical parts. Some models are personalized, belonging to noble houses and passed down from generation to generation, but standard-issue versions also exist.
Aurons
Special particles used to power Chasseurs. Also known as "false aura," they react with the aura of aura knights and other auramancers, allowing them to control a Chasseur's movements directly.
Tishna Lumedienne Charlgiana
Fourth princess of the Kingdom of Charlgia, Tishna is known as the "Snow-White Tranquility" and is heralded for her beauty. However, she is also considered stuck-up and snooty, and her people call her the "Wicked Princess." What are the motivations behind her actions...?
Auriol Ref Argenteia
Crown prince of the Argyll Empire and Fiarca's older twin brother, Auriol was once a dear friend to Ras. It is he who manages much of the day-to-day running of the empire in place of his infirm father, and the people of the realm adore him. There are talks of marriage between him and Princess Tishna of the neighboring kingdom.
Fiarca Jeva Argenteia
First crown princess of the Argyll Empire, Fiarca is known far and wide as the "Silver Bloom" due to her beauty. Unbeknownst to most, she has a mischievous side and loves scheming. She and Ras were in a mutual, loving relationship until two years ago, when she reportedly lost her life during the war.
Ras Talion Veredica
Formerly betrothed to Fiarca, the imperial princess, Ras proved his formidable battle prowess by single-handedly slaying a Greater Dragon. After the princess's death, he spiraled into hedonism, visiting brothels night after night and earning himself the derisive moniker "the Stallion."

Sword of the Stallion

1

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako

YEN ON
New York

COPYRIGHT

Sword of the Stallion 1

Gakuto Mikumo

Translation by **Jake Humphrey**

Cover art by **Manyako**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SWORD OF STALLION Vol. 1 TANEUMA TO YOBARETA SAIKYOKISHI, RINGOKU NO OJO O NETORE TO MEIJIRARERU

©Gakuto Mikumo 2023

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress • twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com • instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2025

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Lilliana Checo Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBNs: 979-8-8554-0721-1 (paperback) 979-8-8554-0722-8 (ebook)

CONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1 The Stallion Knight Is Ordered to Seduce a Princess of the Neighboring Kingdom

CHAPTER 2 The Stallion Knight Reunites with His Ex-Fiancée

CHAPTER 3 The Stallion Knight Riles Up Central Command

CHAPTER 4 The Stallion Knight Unleashes His Over Arts

CHAPTER 5 The Stallion Knight Encounters a Legendary Chasseur

CHAPTER 6 The Stallion Knight Infiltrates the Kingdom

EPILOGUE

BONUS TALE The Melancholy of a Cross-Dressing Princess

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

PROLOGUE

Looks like trouble.

Such was the thought Ras Talion had upon seeing the two women who barred his path.

Prouss was a commercial hub and the second-largest city in the Argyll Empire. Even in the dead of night, the main street was rich with the sounds of foreign merchants hawking their wares and mercenaries seeking a temporary respite. But step just a stone's throw away, and the city's atmosphere shifted. An assortment of suggestive nameplates broke through the gloom, and the heavy scent of perfume assaulted the senses. Windows bathed in the light of red lamps allowed a peek into all sorts of scandalous scenes.

These were the pleasure-houses, where ladies of the night marketed their goods.

The finest prostitutes in all the realm gathered there, and men were treated to a first-class service…so long as they could pay for it. Decent, well-meaning citizens gave the district a wide berth, but Ras was neither decent nor well-meaning. The moment he set foot within the district's borders, a pair of unfamiliar women accosted him.

The first to speak was the taller of the two, a woman with black hair.

"Sir Ras Talion Veredica, I presume?"

A piercing gaze lent weight to her forceful words. She looked young, about twenty-two or twenty-three if Ras had to guess, and was dressed in an inconspicuous long, ratty coat, beneath which Ras glimpsed the telltale glint of a well-kept metal breastplate. A bulge in the cloth gave away the rough shape of a sword secured at her hip.

This woman was undoubtedly an aura knight—and a noble besides.

"Apologies," said Ras curtly. "I've already reserved a girl for tonight. Perhaps we can get acquainted some other time?"

"Wha—?!" the girl bellowed, clearly offended by Ras's presumption. She shot him a rotten glare, but the man didn't so much as blink. In this part of the city, a woman had only one reason to approach a man on the street. Ras's conclusion may not have been correct, but it was perfectly reasonable.

Meanwhile, the second woman, standing a little behind the first, chuckled, apparently finding humor in Ras's mean-spirited taunt.

This woman was dressed similarly to the first, in a long, ash-gray coat, but she also wore a hood, so Ras couldn't get a good look at her face. Only a few strands of silver hair caught his eye; that hair color was a rare sight in this part of the world.

"Do we look like a couple of whores to you?!" the first woman roared.

Ras snorted. "Well, who else would approach a man here? This isn't exactly the noble quarter."

"Believe you me, I know. But we've heard you're a difficult man to find anywhere else."

"…Says who?"

Ras furrowed his brow. There were few reasons someone would be looking for him, and not many of them were good reasons. The raven-haired woman seemed to realize she'd said too much, and she swiftly clammed up. Meanwhile, the second woman stepped forward.

"You're quite the household name, Ras Talion. People say you practically live in these brothels."

"That they do."

"And they also say," the silver-haired woman went on, "that that's not enough for you. That you woo the ordinary maidens of this city as well, chaste and wedded alike. That's why they call you 'the Stallion.'"

"You've done your research," said Ras, in genuine surprise.

The hooded woman smiled. "The rumors are true, then?"

"They're not entirely without merit."

"Hmm. In that case, I wonder if the rest is true? They say your lover lost her life in the troubles two years back."

"What's it to you? Come to warm my bed in her place?"

Ras's provocation failed to stoke the silver-haired woman's ire. Instead, she grinned.

"If that is the compensation you require," she said, "it can be arranged."

"…What do you mean by compensation?"

"We have a job for you, Ras Talion."

"What kind of job?"

"That will take some time to explain," the silver-haired woman said. "Would you care to join us?"

"I already told you. I have business. Brothel business."

Ras cut the conversation short and made to take his leave, but the raven-haired woman blocked his path.

"Not so fast, Ras Talion. My lady has requested an audience with you. It would be wise to hear what she has to say."

"Would it, now? Well, I don't care."

"…What?"

The raven-haired woman had clearly not been expecting such a blunt refusal. As she stood there in shock, Ras went on.

"I told you, I'm busy. If this business of yours is really worth bothering me about, then tell Auriol he can come and meet me in person."

"…?!"

The raven-haired warrior stiffened, and her hand flew to her waist. That reaction told Ras all he needed to know. His hunch was correct: These two women were in the employ of Auriol Ref Argenteia—the crown prince of their nation.

"How did you know I work for His Highness?" the raven-haired woman asked, her voice aquiver.

"A simple deduction," replied Ras with a smirk. "First, your form. Ready to step in and defend your charge at a moment's notice. It's the exact stance they teach at the imperial barracks."

Just for a moment, the raven-haired woman dropped her gaze and cursed under her breath.

"But more importantly, your sword," Ras continued. "You don't see rapiers like that outside Kidea. I only know of one woman in the Imperial Guard who trained in the southern continent, and that's the daughter of the Aluarche family, Lady Kanalayka. News of your appointment to Auriol's personal guard hasn't escaped us all the way out here in Prouss, you know."

The raven-haired woman, Kanalayka Aluarche, huffed in admiration. "I think I'm starting to see why His Highness is so interested in you," she said, before drawing her sword from its sheath. The blade was light gray and delicately thin, and she leveled its tip square at Ras's throat.

"Does this interest involve killing me?" asked Ras, unperturbed.

"No. But His Highness ordered me to bring you in by any means necessary."

There wasn't a whit of levity to be found across her stony features. This woman, it seemed, was determined to carry out her master's orders to the letter.

Ras sighed deeply. "They say not a single person in the Imperial Guard has ever bested Lady Kanalayka in a spar," he said. "Is that true?"

His opponent was a legate of the Imperial Guard, and Ras was completely unarmed. The backstreets of the pleasure quarter were

not deserted, either, but nobody stepped up to defend Ras. Instead, they all stopped and stared, waiting to see what would happen.

Kanalayka kept her sword level and backed Ras into a corner, blocking the exit and preventing the curious citizens from getting caught up in what was to come. It was a courteous, noble act, but it left one very important route wide open.

"What's the matter? Are you scared?" she asked. "You can always come in peace, if you prefer."

Ras grinned. "I have a better idea."

"Do you, now? It had better not involve running. There's nowhere to go."

Kanalayka was beginning to lose her patience. Ras turned and looked back over his shoulder. The only thing there was a brick wall, with a glass window that offered a dirt-caked view into a tavern bustling with rowdy guests.

"Isn't there?"

With that, Ras spun, driving his elbow into the glass and shattering it. In the same fluid motion, he dove into the building. His sudden appearance amid a shower of broken glass startled the patrons, and they all screamed.

Kanalayka was aghast. For all her rigid training at the imperial barracks, she'd never encountered a tactic like this. Meanwhile, Ras seized the opportunity to escape deeper into the crowd, hoping to throw the imperial guardswoman off his trail. His dramatic entrance, however, drew the attention of the tavern's stocky landlady.

"You again, Ras? We have a front door, you know!"

"Sorry. Send Fon the repair bill, will you?"

Fon was the owner of Ras's favorite brothel. Ras often brought trouble to this tavern, and it was usually related to a woman. As he passed through the crowded tavern, patrons recognized him and called out.

"Ho there, Stallion! Pissed off an aura knight this time? You're a braver man than me, aye!"

"When she gets a hold of you, I hope she cuts your balls off!"

"Shut up! Out of my way."

Ras had somewhat of an ill reputation. He'd made plenty of enemies, and even when he hadn't, his popularity with women meant people still bore a grudge anyway. Ras had to endure taunts from jealous citizenry wherever he went.

Several of them tried to block his flight, but Ras barged past them and exited the tavern through the rear door. Kanalayka was nowhere to be seen, so Ras assumed he must have lost her. Just a little farther, and Ras would enter a labyrinthine residential district filled with twists and turns. They would have no chance of following him in there.

Ras chuckled to himself, relishing the thrill of escape. It was at that moment the sky directly above his head lit up.

"What the—?!"

The source of the light was a burning fireball, more than one meter in diameter. It flew over Ras's head like a cannonball and crashed into the ground just ahead of him, where it exploded, filling the narrow alleyway with flames. Ras found his path barred by blistering heat and an acrid smell like burning lamp oil.

This was the result of sixth-level auramancy called Fiery Blast. It utilized moisture and carbon dioxide in the air. The caster had to be somewhere nearby.

"What are they thinking, setting off an explosion in the middle of the city?!" Ras muttered to himself. He spun around and looked in the direction where the fireball had come from. There, on the rooftop of the tavern Ras had just exited, stood a hooded woman—the silver-haired figure, Kanalayka's companion. Ras glared at her.

"Did she predict I was going to come this way? Who is she anyway?"

It wasn't the woman's auramancy skill that weighed on Ras's mind, but the swiftness of her response. It was like she knew what Ras was going to do before he did. Her fireball had served not only to cut off Ras's escape route but also to alert Kanalayka of his whereabouts, and it wasn't long before the imperial guardswoman,

attracted by the sound of the explosion, burst out of the tavern and cornered Ras in the alleyway.

"Found you, Ras Talion! You won't elude me this time!"

Seething with anger, Kanalayka pointed her rapier. Ras turned and sighed. He'd been hoping to slip away and avoid an incident, but there was little chance of that now.

"I didn't want to do this," he said. "Do you know what they do to the poor bastards who injure an imperial guard?"

"Ha! Is that a joke? As if you could lay one scratch on me!"

A pattern of red lines, like blood vessels, appeared across the surface of Kanalayka's blade. It was a sign that the swordswoman had infused her weapon with aura. Though made of solid stone, an aura knight's sword could slice through just about anything when in this state.

On the other hand, such a sharp blade left a clean wound, easy to treat using rudimentary techniques. Kanalayka was no doubt intending to cut off an arm or a leg to incapacitate him, then put Ras back together later.

It was a sound plan…against any other foe, at least.

Ras sighed again. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

He strode toward Kanalayka, but there was no sign of a weapon or anything in his hands. The imperial guardswoman was surprised by that, but it didn't delay her decision-making for even a second. Quick as a flash, she leaped into the air, swinging her sword in a downward arc.

However, her attack never made contact. With split-second timing, Ras slammed his palm into his fist, catching the blade between them.

"What?!"

Kanalayka couldn't believe her eyes. Her enhanced weapon was sharp enough to cut through steel, yet Ras broke it into splinters with nothing more than his bare hands.

"Y-you shattered my sword… How?!" Kanalayka reeled in shock, but Ras simply stepped right by her and kept on walking.

"Sorry about that," he said, "but I'm not paying for it. You attacked me first."

Just as Ras was about to leave, he paused in his tracks. Standing in his way was the hooded woman with silver hair, blocking the very path down which he had intended to escape.

"You haven't lost your touch," she said. "Even Kanalayka wasn't enough to bring you in."

The silver-haired woman didn't seem too surprised. Considering Ras just trounced the Imperial Guard's top knight, he expected more of a reaction. Instead, it almost seemed like this was just another thing she'd predicted.

"Who *are* you?" Ras asked. He couldn't shake the feeling the silver-haired woman was acting differently now, like her prior behavior had only been an act. When she spoke, it brought to mind a memory. A memory of a time long ago.

"If you would like to know who I am," she said, grinning and drawing her sword, "then why don't you come and find out?"

Ras was surprised to see her armed with a blade. Usually, auramancy of the caliber she had fired off earlier required focused study, but judging by the glow of her weapon, he assumed this woman was fairly proficient in the physical arts as well.

Still not as skilled as Kanalayka, though, Ras thought. He'd have little trouble removing the woman's hood and seeing the face she seemed so intent on hiding. He had to admit, he was a little curious. But more than anything else, Ras just wanted to wipe that all-knowing smirk off her face.

"Don't go crying to Auriol if I end up hurting you," he jeered.

"Who knows? Maybe you'll be the one crying."

"Like hell!"

Ras lunged, and the silver-haired woman swung her sword. Her attack was much faster and more forceful than Ras had been expecting, but it seemed that despite her ferocity, the silver-haired woman didn't want to hurt him. She was holding back, and that

meant Ras had just enough room to avoid her attack. As he stepped past her, he grabbed her hood, ripping it back.

Silver threads glistened like a snowfield under the moonlight. When her hair settled, she turned her violet eyes on Ras.

Ras couldn't breathe. Not because the woman before him was like an angel given human form, but because her flawless features were those of someone he knew very well.

"Your Highness!" called a voice from behind them.

Finally over the shock of losing her sword, Kanalayka rushed around the corner and onto the scene. But her words only served to reinforce the impossibility of what Ras was seeing.

"Th-that…can't be," he stammered, as though his voice might give out at any moment. Search as he might, he couldn't find the words. The disturbance he felt at that moment eclipsed all else.

The lady standing before him could only be one person. But it was a person who could not have existed.

Because she was meant to be *dead*. Killed in the rebellion of two years prior.

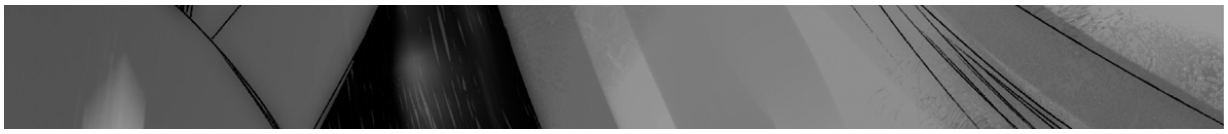
"I finally found you, Ras."

The violet-eyed woman brushed her fingers softly against Ras's chest. He felt the aura surging through her fingers, signifying the invocation of a technique: third-level auramancy called Thunderbolt, which amplified ambient static electricity into a high-voltage current powerful enough to bring a man to his knees.

"Fi…," he murmured as his consciousness slipped away. "Why…?"

But Fiarca Jeva Argenteia, the dearly departed imperial princess, only smiled.







CHAPTER 1 The Stallion Knight Is Ordered to Seduce a Princess of the Neighboring Kingdom

1

Ras realized he was having a nightmare. A memory of a secluded forest, soaked in blood and death.

Harsh evening rain wet the surface of a sooty metal shell.

Far on the western edge of the continent of Danakil, close to where the land met the Orange Ocean, a steel giant slumped to its knees.

It was a Chasseur d'Acier—a gift to humanity that made it possible to take on the largest of fiends. It took the form of a mechanical humanoid and was approximately nine meters tall.

This unit, however, was heavily damaged, and circulatory fluid was leaking from the cracks, painting the frame crimson. Its chest had been ripped open, revealing the machine's skeleton, as well as the pilot's cockpit.

In the cockpit was a young aura knight, at most about seventeen or eighteen years old. The delicate features of youth accompanied the boy's firm physique.

This young man was badly wounded, just like the Chasseur itself. He was still alive, barely, and hemorrhaging blood to the point that it was a miracle he was still conscious.

He crawled out of the cockpit and glared at the foe towering opposite him, a truly colossal fiend over twenty meters tall.

Its silica scales could stand up to cannon fire, and its teeth and claws were sharper than a steel blade. A pair of ferocious wings allowed for rapid flight despite the creature's awesome size, while a single whip of its tail could breach a city wall.

It was the most terrifying creature to ever walk the earth. The undisputed king of beasts. A dragon. And a Greater Dragon at that.

However, this dragon, once mighty, was no more.

Lodged in its chest was an enormous, shattered sword of stone, the weapon of the boy's own Chasseur. But while he had slain the beast, the vindictive dragon had not gone down without a final parting blow.

Under normal circumstances, it was preposterous to think that a single Chasseur could take down a Greater Dragon. It would require a whole battalion just to stand a chance of driving the fiend away.

Felling it solo was a heroic feat that would ensure one's place alongside the legends of old, but the boy had no time to relish his hard-won victory.

"Fi…! Ngh…!"

He marched on, leaving his damaged unit behind. The clearing was littered with wreckage—Chasseur parts that had been torn off, not only by the dragon but by other machines. This arena had originally been the battleground for a fight between Chasseurs, but when the Greater Dragon showed up, it laid waste to friend and foe alike, right up until the boy's unit dealt the killing blow.

"Where are you, Fi?! Answer me! Fiarca!"

He staggered between flattened trees, searching for something. A single Chasseur. And at last, amid the tragic scars of war, he found it.

It was close to where the fighting had been the harshest. Countless steel giants, allied and enemy alike, slumped unmoving in the vicinity, scattered like corpses.

The boy came upon a pair of them, one a violet hue and the other a sky blue. Their positions suggested that each had been trying to protect the other in death.

The violet one was damaged beyond all recognition, while the sky-blue one had suffered a deep impaling wound to the chest.

Despair crept across the young boy's face. His legs began to tremble. The rain beat mercilessly down, clouding the tragic scene in mist.

And then he saw it.

Through the warped steel of the violet unit's crushed cockpit, he glimpsed a few long strands of silver hair, drenched in a puddle of blood. Crushed beneath the weight of her own Chasseur was the mangled corpse of the boy's lover.

2

Like being dragged to the surface of a deep, dark lake, Ras awoke. His head was spinning. Every muscle in his body felt like solid lead. Fatigue and nausea assaulted his senses in waves. Ras recognized the aftereffects of an auramancy-induced coma. That was probably what had caused his unnerving dream, too.

As soon as he opened his eyes, Ras heard a voice.

“Are you awake, Sir Talion?”

The frigid, monotone voice belonged to the servant standing by his bedside. She was a petite girl, and Ras didn’t recognize her.

“Who are you?” he asked, sitting up in bed and scanning his surroundings. The room was small but finely made up. The sheets were clean, and tasteful, stylish furniture decorated the space. It all looked very expensive.

“My name is Shishka Klamina,” the girl said, giving a courteous bow. “I serve the crown prince in my capacity as an attendant of the imperial palace.”

“The imperial palace?!” Ras exclaimed. “I was in Prouss just last night! How did I get here?”

“Quite right you are, my lord. I was informed that Lady Kanalayka brought you back in her Chasseur.”

“All the way to the imperial city…”

Ras sighed. Prouss was the empire’s largest port. With trade and commerce the nation’s bedrock, it served as the heart of the empire’s economy. The capital city of Vif Arger was relatively small by comparison, but as it housed the emperor’s dwellings, it was more heavily fortified. Even an imperial guardswoman like Kanalayka would be prohibited from approaching the city walls in a Chasseur without the express permission of the crown, which meant Ras’s abduction could only have been sanctioned by the emperor himself.

“I apologize for not allowing you to rest longer, my lord,” said Shishka in a dispassionate tone, “but I have drawn you a bath and arranged a change of clothes. His Majesty is expecting you shortly.”

Ras looked up at the ceiling. He’d been kidnapped, brought to Vif Arger against his will, and now awaited an audience with the emperor. Even Ras couldn’t fight his way out of this one. He’d be accused of treason, or lèse-majesté at the very least, and thrown in prison or worse.

Shishka indicated one of the doors leading out of the bedchamber. It appeared to open into an adjoined private bathroom, the very height of luxury.

"Do you require assistance bathing?" she asked.

"No. Just show me how it all works."

"Very well."

Shishka propped open the bathroom door and swiftly set about filling the bathtub. The ease with which she carried out her duties made Ras think she must have been working there for a while. But even so, it struck him as odd—here he was, waiting to see the emperor, and only one maid attended to him. It was a little underwhelming, no matter how highly skilled she was.

"Are you the only one here?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord," said Shishka. Now she looked a little embarrassed. "The other servants were afraid to come near you. They have returned to their posts."

"Afraid of me? Why?"

"Because of your reputation as the Stallion, my lord. They feared if they were to touch you by accident, they would become with child immediately."

"Really? People believe that nonsense?" remarked Ras, grimacing. It seemed the tales he inspired only grew more absurd the farther they spread. In the minds of the people here, Ras was practically a paranormal creature. So he wondered why Shishka was different.

"What about you, then?" he asked. "Are you not afraid?"

"I am the daughter of an impoverished house, my lord," she explained with a wistful smile. "My parents would be only too happy to see me driven to death and shame, so they can receive the money His Majesty has promised as reparations."

"I see. Well, aren't you a brave one?"

Ras put on his most cynical grin and sighed, shaking his head. If this conversation was anything to go by, his troubles were only just beginning.

3

The clothes Shishka had prepared for Ras turned out to be the ceremonial dress of the cavalrymen from the Far East.

Ras had grown up in the county east of Argyll, and on paper, he was still a member of the county's border patrol force. Ras's biological father, the esteemed Count Veredica, had pulled some strings to make it so, not out of any love for his son but because the county needed any aura knight it could get its hands on to defend the nation in times of war.

The question did not escape Ras of how, precisely, this uniform had made its way here from the distant lands of his birth. He couldn't help but feel like something deeply unpleasant was about to happen.

"Thank you for everything, Miss Klamina," he said, after he had finished changing.

"Your gratitude is wasted on me, my lord. I merely wish you well on your travels."

Shishka bowed deeply. She wasn't particularly friendly, but she was a good sort, Ras could tell that. The blame would fall on her shoulders if he were to go missing between here and the audience chamber, so Ras put thoughts of escape out of his mind and went to see what the crown had to say.

This was exactly what Auriol had been aiming for by sending Shishka alone. Ras was a kind soul when it came to women, and a cunning manipulator could take advantage of that fact. The Auriol Ras knew, however, was not that type. He didn't take Kanalayka for the scheming sort, either. Which could only mean someone else was pulling their strings.

Ras's mind went back to the silver-haired woman who had brought him in. Her eyes were the same as Princess Fiarca's. It was no mystery why she had disguised herself as Ras's deceased lover—it was the best way to throw him off in battle, and it had worked. But Ras was not foolish enough to fall for the same trick again.

He was curious who she really was beneath the disguise. And if she really was such a schemer, what were she and the crown prince plotting, and how did Ras factor into it…?

With those thoughts whirling around in his head, Ras headed to the antechamber, where all those granted an audience with the emperor awaited their turn. On his way there, he passed several people coming down the hallway: noblemen of the imperial court.

"Is that the Stallion?" one muttered, intentionally loud enough for Ras to hear. "How dare he show his face in such august surroundings?"

"Did he tire of handling the sailors' wenches and come to lay his filthy paws on a highborn girl?"

"His Highness must be embarrassed to have trained alongside him at the academy. What is he thinking, inviting him here?"

As much as he wanted to start a fight, Ras knew it was boorish to do so. The men could just claim innocence, and Ras would look like a fool for making a fuss. Ras heard abuse wherever he went—this was nothing new. Besides, he didn't want to stay at the palace a second longer than necessary.

But as it turned out, Ras wasn't the only one who heard the gentlemen's disparaging comments.

"Are you really going to let them get away with that, Sir Talion?"

Standing before the door to the antechamber was someone Ras didn't expect. It was the raven-haired legate of the Imperial Guard.

"Kanalayka Aluarche."

"Why are you letting those men's insults go unanswered? Is your honor not worth defending?"

Kanalayka, it seemed, was not particularly fond of the gentlemen, either. Ras was a little taken aback.

"What's the matter?" he asked her. "Grown a conscience? From your treatment of me yesterday, I'd have expected you to join in with them."

Kanalayka looked down regretfully.

"I read your file," she said.

"And who's been writing one of those?"

"His Highness. He's been observing you for some time, Ras Talion, with the cooperation of your father."

"…Hmm. And? Anything shocking in there?"

"Every single one of the women you're rumored to have bedded has had personal problems—abusive husbands at home, employers who work them like slaves, or lovers who force them to handle dirty money on behalf of their criminal associates."

As Kanalayka rattled off the list, Ras grimaced. He knew just which women those descriptors referred to, which meant that someone really had been surveilling him.

"You not only helped these women escape their troubled circumstances, you also dealt with the perpetrators…discreetly."

"Don't mistake me for some do-good vigilante," Ras interjected. "I simply racked up more debts than I could repay, so the brothels had me do their dirty work; that's all."

Kanalayka nodded fiercely, as though that was precisely the answer she'd been expecting.

"Speaking of which, I looked into this brothel you're so keen on. The owner is one Fon Cigel—the Black Blade herself! You were only pretending to use the brothels, when in fact you were receiving her tutelage every time, am I right?"

The girl was getting rather excited, and Ras wasn't sure what to do with her. His smile was becoming more and more strained. "I wouldn't say *every* time…"

Fon Cigel was one of the four Blades of Danakil—masters of the sword—and her name and auramancy skill were known and feared across the land. Despite being over fifty, she looked like she'd just turned twenty. A monster beyond all human reckoning.

A little over twenty years ago, after supposedly rescuing the young and reckless emperor of Argyll from a sticky situation involving a Sand Dragon, she moved to the Argyll Empire. The emperor said she could have anything her heart desired as a reward, and Fon requested permission to own and operate her own brothel.

Ever since then, the woman lived a quiet life, free from woes and responsibilities, until two years ago, when Ras was roped into becoming her disciple.

"Oh, there's no need to be humble, Sir Talion. You shattered my trusty blade with your bare hands. Who else could have taught you to do that?"

Kanalayka stroked the pommel at her hip. Then she turned to face Ras and bowed her head deeply.

"…Er, Lady Aluarche?"

"Please, Sir Talion, call me Kanalayka."

Ras suddenly felt all eyes on him. All the maids and the clerks who were passing by had stopped and were staring. The top knight of the Imperial Guard was bowing her head to the Stallion himself. It was an incredible sight.

"I beg your pardon for my vulgar behavior yesterday, my lord. Had I known you were the disciple of the Black Blade, I never would have—"

"It's all right. Please just stop…," Ras pleaded wearily.

Even without makeup, Kanalayka had a pretty face and proportions to match. Plus, given her hardworking style, it was safe to say she was picky when it came to choosing a romantic partner… which was to say she didn't have one. People would certainly talk up a storm if a maiden like that were seen *cavorting* with the infamous Stallion. A loose tongue here and there, and the whole palace would be abuzz within the hour. Ras didn't exactly want to be accused of working his charms on the palace guards before he'd even had his audience.

"I'm glad you don't hate my guts anymore, but this is too far the other way," he warned her. "A worse man than me could take

advantage of a girl as trusting as you."

But Kanalayka pursed her lips and shook her head.

"I didn't change my mind just because I read a sob story or two. How gullible do you think I am?"

Ras frowned. "So there's another reason?"

A beaming smile appeared on the guardswoman's face, and she nodded.

"His Highness speaks very highly of you. He says you're the only man who can save us from this crisis."

"Crisis?" Ras was surprised by Kanalayka's choice of words. "What kind of trouble did you and Auriol get yourselves into?"

But the young lady shook her head again and turned her piercing eyes on Ras. In a voice just soft enough for nobody to overhear, she explained.

"You misunderstand, Sir Talion. It is not I nor His Highness who is in peril…but the entire Argyll Empire."

4

After a short wait in the antechamber, Kanalayka led Ras into the audience room.

When Ras entered the grand and imposing hall, he saw that several court ministers and imperial guards were already inside. On a raised platform at the back were three men.

The central figure, sitting on a throne, was the emperor of Argyll, His Imperial Majesty Uragan Greva Argenteia III. He was a capable leader, having swiftly united the fracturing realm in the wake of his father's death, and the people respected him greatly.

However, an attempt on his life during the war had left him with a debilitating illness, and to Ras now, the emperor was a mere shadow of the man he had met two years earlier. While still as strong-willed as ever, the emperor had been appearing in public less frequently.

He was flanked by an aged man of impressive stature who had striking white hair. This was the realm's prime minister, Davrota

Aluarche, and his service extended all the way back to the time of the previous emperor. He was a shrewd and keen-witted individual, and some said it was only him and his army of pencil pushers who stood between Argyll and the chaos of anarchy.

The third and final figure sat at the emperor's left hand, and it was the very man responsible for Ras's presence here: the crown prince, Auriol Ref Argenteia. A peculiar black mask covered the lower half of the boy's face. When he saw Ras enter the room, his sapphire gaze seemed to soften in relief.

Ras sighed inwardly, then kneeled before the three figures. The prime minister leaned over and whispered Ras's name into the emperor's ear, whereupon the man nodded gravely.

"Are you Ras Talion Veredica, son of Count Veredica?" he asked.

"I am, Your Imperial Majesty," replied Ras, keeping his head bowed. He thought he could hear the ministers and guards whispering to one another in the wings. Though Ras was of noble birth, he was still only a mere border guard. It was difficult for them to imagine what circumstances resulted in him attracting the emperor's personal attention.

It was an honor, to be sure, but for Ras, it was an unwelcome one. He could only wonder where on earth this conversation would go.

"I commend you on your heroic deeds during the Yura Uprising two years ago," the emperor said. "Our victory rested on the back of your slaying of Kiha Zenri, the Greater Dragon."

"…You are too kind, sire," Ras muttered, stifling his objections.

Two years ago, an international dispute had broken out on the border between Argyll and the Padyne Federation of City-States. It was during that conflict that the Greater Dragon appeared, but it wasn't to secure the empire's victory that Ras had slain it.

The dragon had already done that by itself. After it appeared, it massacred the ranks of the city-state alliance. If the empire's victory rested upon anything, it was the dragon itself—or to be precise, the cunning individual who had summoned it.

Foreseeing the empire's defeat, this individual had lured the dragon to the battlefield, where it proceeded to lay waste to allied and enemy forces alike. They were so committed to this plan that they even used the imperial princess as bait.

And the person who came up with and executed this ruthless scheme was none other than Princess Fiarca herself.

After learning what she intended to do, Ras hurried to the battlefield, but all that awaited him were the battered husks of dozens upon dozens of ruined Chasseurs and a maddened beast attacking anyone who tried to escape.

So Ras slew the Greater Dragon, all for the sake of Princess Fiarca.

But he was too late.

The dragon slew the princess, and Ras slew the dragon. That was all there was to it. That was the truth of what had happened two years before.

"Your great deeds should have brought fame and honor to your name. I can only regret this nation was not able to pay you the proper respects in reward for your service."

"I understand, sire."

Ras uttered a hollow response to the emperor's trite words.

The empire's "victory" nonetheless robbed the realm of its princess and left its armies in tatters. Far from hailing him as a hero, many people instead blamed Ras for failing to protect her.

However, no one was more devastated by her loss than he. Fiarca had been a lifelong friend, a classmate at the same academy, and she and Ras had been due to be wed in a public ceremony. Before he could receive his honors for defeating the dragon, Ras resigned from Central Command and vanished from public life.

Even so, the empire could have recognized Ras's deeds publicly, but they hadn't. Ras couldn't blame them, though. No doubt they were just as eager to put the whole miserable mess behind them.

And yet here the emperor was, heaping praise on Ras's achievements. Something seemed off. What was the meaning of this?

"I admit the time has long since passed, but I would see your brave efforts rewarded. I hereby bestow upon you one of the empire's most treasured Chasseurs d'Acier, the *Vildhjärta*, to be used as you see fit."

"You honor me, sire."

Ras breathed a sigh of relief. It was an age-old tradition to bequeath a custom-made Chasseur to a knight who slew a dragon. It was a great honor, but an unenviable responsibility. The costs associated with keeping a top-of-the-line Chasseur in prime working condition were no laughing matter.

Still, it was a far sight better than receiving some bothersome title with all its associated headaches. The ministers on the sidelines seemed to think so, too, as they all breathed a collective sigh upon seeing the nation's debt to Ras settled.

However, they stiffened when the emperor next spoke.

"Furthermore," he said, "as of today, you will be bestowed the title Guardian of Silver, and you will report directly to Crown Prince Auriol."

"Um…pardon?"

Ras's ill-mannered response should have earned him a stern rebuke, but nobody said a word. Save the crown prince and the prime minister, the emperor's words had stunned the whole room into silence.

On paper, Guardian of Silver was a purely honorary role, with no place in the chain of command. However, the position afforded its bearer enormous privileges. Guardians of Silver were the elite of the elite, the most skilled knights the empire had to offer, and in terms of the palace hierarchy, they sat at the same level as the prime minister. They held the right to inspect any part of the empire's military, and in times of national emergency, they could even issue orders on behalf of the emperor.

Usually, only imperial legates or army generals were appointed to the position, and they needed to be distinguished aura knights of long-standing service.

Ras wasn't even a member of the Imperial Guard and, despite his feat, had no track record to speak of. Appointing him to such a lofty position was practically a breach of national security.

Before anyone could react, the prime minister spoke up and signaled that the audience was over.

"Auriol will explain the particulars to you," he said. "That is all. You may go."

The ministers were all shown from the audience room before any of them had a chance to question His Imperial Majesty's judgment. Likewise, Kanalayka came up to Ras and swiftly escorted him from the chamber.

And so Ras left the meeting with more questions than when he'd entered. All he understood was that in the span of a few minutes, he had suddenly become the most important aura knight in all of Argyll.

5

What the hell was that? Ras thought.

Just the day before, he had been a mercenary, prowling the streets of Prouss and selling his services to the highest bidder. Overnight, his life had changed. After being practically kidnapped and whisked away to Vif Arger, Ras had spoken with the emperor, who had personally made him a Guardian of Silver. What had happened was too far-fetched for even the most absurd fantasy.

The only thing Ras understood for sure was that two people were undoubtedly behind all this: Auriol, the crown prince, and Kanalayka Aluarche, legate of the Imperial Guard.

After the pair left the antechamber, and once no one was within earshot, Ras leaned over and whispered his grievances to Kanalayka.

"I think it's about time you told me what's really going on, don't you?"

"What do you mean by that?" the imperial guardswoman replied.

Ras huffed. "Don't play dumb with me. Me? A Guardian of Silver? Either there's some funny business afoot, or the emperor's finally

lost his damned mind."

Kanalayka didn't comment on Ras's irreverent remark. She simply turned to him with the same no-nonsense look as ever.

"I think you're the perfect man for the job, given your credentials," she said.

"Is this about my file again?"

"No, it's about what I saw with my own eyes. There's no one more fit to lead the Imperial Guard than a man who can crush an energized aura blade with his bare hands. I didn't even think that was possible."

Ras sighed. "That was just a parlor trick. It's not so hard if you know what you're doing."

An aura knight's sword was technically not stone but zirconium dioxide, fortified with alumina and other materials to form a supremely hard ceramic blade. This resulted in a weapon that was resistant to wear and tear, but in return, it was brittle and prone to fracture. The application of aura could make up for this weakness somewhat, but not entirely. Ras's attack had simply taken advantage of that fact.

"I think most people die before they reach that level of skill," commented Kanalayka.

"I'm just saying one feat of legerdemain doesn't make me invincible. You saw how easily your partner took me down."

But Kanalayka shook her head in response to his self-deprecation. "That was all thanks to her plan. She knew that disguising herself as the late princess would throw you off guard."

"That doesn't make it any less despicable."

Ras glared at Kanalayka, but he was equally ashamed at himself for having fallen for the deception so easily. It was a dirty, underhanded trick, the likes of which the Imperial Guard rarely used.

But Kanalayka showed no shame. In fact, she was smiling.

"You still love her, don't you? Even after all this time."

"Love's got nothing to do with it. Seeing someone dressed up as a dead woman would shock anyone."

"Well, let's just leave it at that, then, shall we?" said Kanalayka, still grinning.

Ras frowned and silently followed her lead, but he suddenly stopped when he realized they were heading toward the rear of the palace.

"Hold on," he said. "Did we take a wrong turn? This isn't the way to the city."

"I'm not taking you to the city," Kanalayka replied. "From this day on, you will be sharing lodgings with the crown prince."

Ras's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "…What?"

It wasn't as if Ras and Auriol were total strangers. Naturally, being trothed to a man's twin sister brought a certain level of familiarity. One might even have gone so far as to call them friends—up until two years prior, at least. After Fiarca's death, the men hadn't even exchanged words. Before his wounds had finished healing, Ras resigned from his post at Central Command and went into hiding.

Auriol was given no time to grieve, either. He was instantly burdened with the court duties of his ailing father, and in the two years that followed, Ras made a name for himself as the Stallion. The two men had nothing in common, and expecting them to start living together was like the plot of a bad play.

"As a Guardian of Silver, you are responsible for the crown prince's safety," Kanalayka explained. "Of course that means you ought to be by his side at all times, does it not?"

"Says who?"

"Why, His Majesty, of course. Did you forget?"

"I don't know if you remember this, but I'm on Count Veredica's border patrol," said Ras with a frown. "Your emperor can't just go around plucking whomever he wants from the armies of his subjects."

"Your father has agreed to our terms," Kanalayka replied. "We compensated him quite handsomely, I might add."

"You really thought of everything, didn't you?"

Ras sighed so deeply he thought his guts would come out. He was starting to get a really bad headache.

"And what is it you need me for so badly?" he asked.

"I think it would be best if His Highness explained that part," said Kanalayka, arriving before a nondescript wooden door.

Only the two guards who flanked the doorway hinted as to the room's true purpose. If Kanalayka was to be believed, this was where Ras would be staying from now on—the private quarters of the crown prince, Auriol Ref Argenteia.

Kanalayka knocked, then entered without waiting for a response. Ras heaved another deep sigh and followed her inside.

6

The room Ras entered was a little smaller than he'd been expecting.

But he quickly discovered it wasn't the only room. Auriol's private quarters turned out to be an entire wing of the palace, with a guest lounge, a study, and even multiple bedrooms. It was a mansion the likes of which no commoner could ever own, not unless they were a prominent landowner or a wealthy merchant.

What surprised Ras most of all, however, was how empty it was—including the crown prince, only two people were living there.

Auriol Ref Argenteia sat at the back of his study, at a large desk that smelled like ink and dust, flipping through a thick stack of official papers. It seemed he had taken a quicker route back from the audience chamber and had already started on his work while Ras and Kanalayka were making their way down the hallways.

Standing next to him was a bespectacled woman who wasn't dressed like a servant. If anything, she seemed more like Auriol's personal secretary. Her hair was a dull silver, and she possessed a startling resemblance to the auramancer who had attacked Ras the previous night.

When Ras entered the room, the two of them looked up at him. The woman flashed him a carefully crafted smile that gave nothing

away, while Auriol's reaction was harder to understand. It was a look at once thoughtful, genial, and suggestive, and it was exactly the Auriol whom Ras used to know.

Of course, much of his expression was obscured by his mask, which the crown prince had begun wearing two years ago, supposedly to hide a horrific scar from a wound inflicted on him during the war. However, even the mask's frightening appearance did nothing to obscure the boy's natural beauty. His feminine features made him the spitting image of the late Princess Fiarca.

As soon as she was in Auriol's presence, Kanalayka stood at attention.

"First Legion Legate Kanalayka Aluarche, sir. I have brought Sir Ras Talion, as requested."

"Excellent," replied Auriol kindly. "Thank you, Kanalayka."

Despite the mask, his words were clear and carried far. Turning his eyes upon Ras, he smiled.

"It's been a while, Ras. You look like you have questions," he said.

"And whose fault might that be?" Ras answered bluntly.

Ras would have been only too pleased if his rudeness offended Auriol and persuaded him to call the whole thing off, but the two men's relationship was much stronger than that. Sure enough, the crown prince only chuckled.

"Before I tell you anything, I'd like to introduce you to somebody," said Auriol, indicating the lady by his side. "This is my ever-reliable aide, Elmira Almathe. If there's anything you wish to know about how things work here in the palace, you need only ask her."

"Feel free to call me Elmira, Sir Talion."

Elmira bowed, while Ras eyed her suspiciously. Though she looked like a noncombatant at first glance, there was something strange and unnatural about the way she moved. The flow of her aura was far too elegant for a person who'd never been in a fight. Plus, she appeared completely unguarded, almost as though she was specifically trying to look that way.

“You’re no mere secretary,” said Ras. “Not an aura knight, either. An assassin, perhaps?”

Ras’s words surprised the woman, causing her mask to slip. For just a moment, Ras felt the true deadly pressure that seeped from her every pore.

“Very impressive, Ras,” said Auriol, arching his eyebrows in surprise. “Not even Kanalayka discerned that on her first meeting. To be precise, she is my operative, as well as my personal bodyguard, of course.”

“The Silver Fangs,” said Ras. “I’ve heard of them. Hardly surprising for a member of the imperial family, I suppose.”

Ras grinned cynically. The Silver Fangs were the empire’s secret network of spies, rumored to handle wet work, sabotage, and counterintelligence. Its agents were trained in secret to be able to handle an aura knight in combat if necessary, and this woman was surely one of them.

But that wasn’t the only reason Auriol was introducing Ras to her.

“Don’t you think she looks like someone?” he asked coyly.

She possessed long silver hair, violet eyes, and although her plain, frumpish attire was made to conceal it, a striking figure. As Auriol implied, she looked unsettlingly similar to the late Princess Fiarca, and also to the woman who attacked Ras the previous night.

But after appraising her for a moment, Ras sighed.

“Fiarca wasn’t as buxom,” he said, “nor as slim around the waist.”

Auriol frowned. If Ras didn’t know better, he’d almost say Auriol was offended. “Can you really tell the difference under all those clothes?” the crown prince asked.

“They don’t call me the Stallion for nothing,” replied Ras. “At the very least, I can tell you for certain this is not the woman I fought last night.”

He wasn’t sure why, but it seemed like Auriol was keen to imply that this woman, Elmira, was the auramancer who had assisted Kanalayka in bringing Ras in. Ras never had much interest in intrigue, so he just came out and aired his doubts.

"Now, how would you know that?" asked the crown prince, eyeing Ras suspiciously. "Surely you weren't spending precious combat seconds taking stock of your assailant's bosom?"

Ras leered. "Believe what you want to believe," he said. "But I'll tell you one thing: Her eye color is fake. It's a cute little auramancy technique. One you don't see too often."

"……I see. I should have known we couldn't put one past you, Ras."

Auriol raised his hands in mock surrender. His theatrical affectations elicited a surly grunt from Ras.

"Quit with the games, Aur. What are you hoping to gain by stringing me along like this? Why did you make me a Guardian of Silver?"

"I thought Kanalayka already told you," Auriol replied with a defiant smile. He sat up straight and looked directly into Ras's eyes. "I have a job for you, Ras. A job that only a Guardian of Silver can carry out."

"And *I* thought *I* already told you no."

"I'm afraid you don't have much choice, Ras. If you don't accept, the empire will perish."

"You said what now?"

Ras blinked in surprise. He would have thought it an ill-natured jest, if not for the deadly serious look on Auriol's face. The crown prince nodded gravely.

"People will die, Ras. Good, innocent people."

"And I'm supposed to stop it?"

"You are. In fact, you're the only one who can," the crown prince declared.

There wasn't a hint of a lie in his words, a fact that only unnerved Ras even more. If Auriol was telling the truth, and the fate of the empire really did hang in the balance, then Ras could see why he had resorted to such drastic measures.

But Ras was only one out of the hundreds of aura knights at the empire's disposal. The only thing setting him apart was that he was

the son of a count, but it wasn't like that gave him any additional powers that Auriol would be able to take advantage of.

Meanwhile, as the crown prince, and with his father's waning health, Auriol practically had the entire might of the empire at his fingertips. What could he possibly need that only Ras could do?

Ras lowered his voice. "Is it a Greater Dragon? If so, there's been no word."

It was the only thing Ras could think of that even Auriol couldn't contest by himself. Unlike Lesser Dragons such as wyverns and wyrms, a Greater Dragon was a civilization-ending calamity. If one of those terrifying beasts came close to a city, there was no telling what kind of havoc it would wreak. It could lay waste to the whole realm, leaving only ruined nations in its wake.

The only ones who could stand against a Greater Dragon were the land's most powerful aura knights, the Blades. But there were only four of them, and they answered to no sovereign. An unspoken accord between the major powers prevented any one nation from harnessing their unrivaled strength for ill gain. The Blades transcended human society and lived unfettered by its laws.

Which meant Auriol would have only one option. If he couldn't employ a Blade, he would have to employ one of their *students* instead. And whom better to pick than someone who had proven themselves against a Greater Dragon already?

If one of those calamitous fiends had been sighted within the borders of the empire, the crown prince would have little choice but to send Ras against it. It was the obvious choice—and the same one Ras would make in that position.

To Ras's surprise, Auriol shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's not what you'll be facing," he said. "But perhaps you'll wish it was."

"You mean it's even worse? What would you have me slay? An Ancient Dragon? An Angel, perhaps?"

Only a handful of creatures surpassed the mighty Greater Dragon, but they were all consigned to the pages of myth. They were living

gods, rumored to sink empires overnight and transform the very land itself. Even a Blade would stand no chance against a living legend like that.

But the grim look on Ras's face made Auriol laugh.

"Don't be silly," he said. "It's none of those—though it may very well prove to be just as much of a headache."

"Enough jokes," said Ras, annoyance creeping into his voice. "Tell me. What would you have me face?"

Auriol's answer was disappointingly plain.

"I want you to seduce a princess."

At first, Ras couldn't understand what he'd been told.

"……You want me to do *what*?"

Auriol's gaze was worryingly stern. This was no joke. Neither Elmira nor Kanalayka said a word.

"Your target," said Auriol, narrowing his sapphire eyes, "is Tishna Lumedienne Charlgiana, the fourth royal princess of the Kingdom of Charlgia."

Ras could barely keep up. Unable to utter a word, he could only stand there in shock as Auriol went on matter-of-factly.

"I need you to seduce her within the next ten months, if you don't mind."



CHAPTER 2 The Stallion Knight Reunites with His Ex-Fiancée

1

The next morning, Ras woke in an unfamiliar but splendid room—a bedroom in Auriol's wing reserved for legates of the Imperial Guard.

Despite the room's sumptuous offerings, Ras had slept poorly. His head felt like lead. Not because of lack of sleep—any aura knight worth their salt could stay awake up to forty-eight hours without adverse effects—but because the events of the previous day had left him mentally and spiritually drained. After receiving a careful explanation, Ras finally felt like he had a complete picture of what awaited him.

When he changed into his new imperial guardsman uniform and left the room, he found someone waiting for him in the guest lounge.

"Ah, you're awake, my lord," she said. It was Shishka Klamina, the frigid servant girl Ras had met the day before.

"That's right," said Ras. "You're the maid around here, aren't you?"

"Yes, my lord."

Shishka nodded. On the table before her was some warm bread and soup, a rather austere meal considering where they were. Shishka had already tasted them for poison, she explained.

Excepting urgent circumstances, the crown prince usually took his meals in his room, and from this day on, Ras would be joining him.

Ras took a jug, poured himself a glass of water, and drained it in one gulp. “Can I give you a hand with anything?” he asked.

Needless to say, a servant girl receiving help from an imperial guardsman was unheard of, but Ras didn’t think of himself that way, even now. No matter what the court records said, Ras considered himself a private mercenary, hired to handle a specific task. In that sense, he was no higher in the pecking order than a simple maid like Shishka. Ras thought it only natural that they would share the grunt work equally, but to his surprise, Shishka turned her cold eyes on him.

“Am I witnessing the Stallion at work already?” she asked. “I can’t say I recommend plying your trade right here in the imperial palace.”

Ras chuckled and shook his head.

“I’m just being friendly,” he said. “If my two years at the whorehouses have taught me anything, it’s to treat women with the same kindness as anyone else. I’m just trying to stay in your good books, that’s all.”

“Hmm.” Shishka paused, apparently taking Ras’s words to heart. “In that case, might I ask you to go and wake our employer up?”

“Still asleep, eh? Got it. I’ll go do that right now.”

Ras made a parting gesture, then headed for the crown prince’s bedroom. After knocking and receiving no response, he turned the doorknob and stepped inside. The room was dominated by an enormous bed that could easily hold half a dozen people at once. Scattered papers were strewn everywhere.

Half-buried beneath those papers was the room’s owner, wearing nothing but a white chemise and drawers. A sea of silver hair spread across the sheets in gentle waves. The black mask was gone now, revealing a set of rosy lips. Ras gazed with mixed feelings at her slender nose and long eyelashes, then spoke the girl’s name.

“Time to wake up, Fi.”

The girl moaned softly and rolled onto her side, opening her violet eyes. When she saw Ras standing there, a playful smile appeared on her lips.

Feeling a migraine coming on, Ras pressed his fingers to his temple. He thought back to the events of the night before, recalling just how things had managed to turn out this way.

2

"You want me to…seduce…a princess of the Charlgia Kingdom?"

The masked Auriol returned Ras's bewildered question with a smile and a nod.

"Princess Tishna is seventeen years old and seventh in the line of succession. She's quite a beauty, too, if her official portrait is anything to go by. Her mother isn't a woman of great standing, but it's said that the king fell instantly in love upon meeting her. I'd say looks must run in the family, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know what you're getting at, Aur. What's all this about?"

Ras was starting to get a strange feeling. Auriol was never the kind of person to revel in another person's confusion like this.

"If you're worried about falling afoul of her present lover, don't be," said Auriol. "She's fair game. You won't be getting on anyone's bad side."

"That's not what I'm asking. What's this princess got to do with anything?"

"We have our reasons, of course. Are you sure you want to know?"

"Why wouldn't I? Spit it out."

"Very well. But I warn you, it's not a straightforward story. Let's go somewhere else. Kanalayka, could you pour us some strong wine?"

"Yes, sir. I'll fetch the Cufida fifteen-year vintage."

Kanalayka's face lit up, and she hurried off. The imperial legate was somewhat of an enthusiast when it came to wine, it seemed.

"That bad, huh?" asked Ras. It wasn't even dark out yet—a little early to be drinking alcohol.

"Consider it a reunion drink," said Auriol. "You will join me, won't you?"

"I won't say no to free booze."

With Elmira leading the way, Ras moved to the guest lounge. Kanalayka walked over to the wine cabinet and picked out a bottle. She poured its contents, a deep bloodred liquid, into two glasses and handed one to Ras.

The fragrance was strong, but pungent and fruity rather than sterile, backed by a faint, smoky undertone.

"This is good wine," Ras remarked, holding up the glass and observing the light filtering through it.

"It was a present," said Auriol, bringing his glass to his lips. The black mask had evidently been designed so that the front could open, allowing the crown prince to eat and drink normally. Its elaborate construction threw Ras for a loop. "I still have a few more bottles, so if you like it, take one with you. Consider it a down payment on your new wages."

"It'll take more than one bottle of wine to make me accept a job I know nothing about."

"Quite sensible, Ras. Let's get to it, then, shall we?"

Auriol's expression became serious.

"You see," he said, staring into Ras's eyes, "there's going to be a wedding."

"…You don't say? And who's the lucky man?"

"I am, Ras. I hope you haven't forgotten I'm next in line to succeed the imperial throne. A man in my position has little choice when it comes to matters of love."

Ras nodded in silent agreement. A bloody civil war about forty years back, coupled with the war of succession in the wake of the former emperor's death, had left the imperial family with very few children. With the loss of Princess Fiarca, the only direct descendant

of Uragan III was Auriol. If he did not produce an heir, the bloodline would be severed.

There was, therefore, no shortage of voices in the realm pressuring Prince Auriol to wed. The border dispute of two years back pushed things off to the side a little, but Auriol's marriage was well overdue.

"Aur…don't tell me, the woman you're marrying is…"

"That's right. Princess Tishna."

The crown prince's voice held little joy, but the decision made sense to Ras. Charlgia was Argyll's neighbor, separated by a mountain range. Though its territory was small, the nation was rich in arts and culture, and they had formed a defensive pact with the empire. Ensuring that a princess of that country would become the next empress of Argyll was a great honor, and it would strengthen the alliance between the two nations. It was a win-win for both parties, one that was sure to garner strong public support, even if it disappointed the ambitious domestic nobles hoping to offer the crown prince their own daughters' hands.

"What's the matter, then?" asked Ras. "Sounds like cause for celebration to me."

"As much as I'd like to agree, I'm afraid it's a little more complicated than that."

Auriol shook his head, a bitter smile on his lips. Ras had never seen the man look so defeated. He raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

"What makes you say that? By the sounds of things, you could hardly ask for a better wife."

"You're not wrong there. And it would certainly get the counts and marquises of the Council of Seven off my back."

"Mmm, yeah. Marrying one of their daughters would only serve to piss off the other six," noted Ras. "So what's the issue?"

"There's something you need to know first, Ras. Do you remember what happened on the final day of the Yura Uprising? Do you remember how Fiarca lost her life?"

Now it was Ras's turn to adopt a sullen frown. It was something he couldn't forget, no matter how hard he tried. The smell of blood. The sight of twisted metal. The day Ras slew a dragon, but in return lost something more precious to him than his own life.

"Why are we talking about this now?" he asked, heaving a deep sigh. "She chose to sacrifice herself. She awoke a sleeping dragon and led the federation's army straight to it. And the worst part is, it was all her idea."

The Yura Uprising had seen the empire deploy a force of more than 180 Chasseurs to the Padyne Federation's 70. By all accounts, the empire should have achieved a resounding victory, but when the imperial forces encountered the enemy army, they found their numbers counted more than 400.

According to interim reports, the enemy had received reinforcements from allies such as the nearby kingdom of Kavir and the superpower of Registan, which controlled the eastern continent. However, details of this assistance never came to light.

In any case, hostilities lasted less than two weeks before the imperial forces were pushed to the brink of defeat. At a crucial moment, Princess Fiarca happened to be visiting the front line along with a supply convoy. She proposed a brilliant plan that no one had ever tried in all of recorded history: to employ the use of a Greater Dragon in war.

On the Yura Peninsula, there was a secluded cave where a Greater Dragon named Kiha Zenri slept. Its location was known to the empire, but the federation had no knowledge of the dragon's existence at all. As far as Princess Fiarca was concerned, Kiha Zenri was their only remaining shot at victory.

Fiarca volunteered to act as a decoy, luring the enemy's main army into the dragon's territory. Once the dragon awoke, it would make short work of the hostile forces.

It was a drastic plan, but not a foolish one. In fact, it gave the empire their best odds at victory. The only catch was that the

princess and her escort would almost certainly be killed in the process.

"That's right," said Auriol. "And the poor little crown prince could do nothing about it. He had suffered an injury the previous day that removed him from the battlefield, and by the time he woke up and realized what his sister was planning, it was too late to stop her… So goes the official story, at least."

Ras was a little put off by Auriol's manner of speaking. "So what you're saying is," he ventured, "that's not what really happened?"

Auriol shook his head and brought his glass of wine to his lips. "It's mostly the truth, save for one little point—it wasn't Fiarca who acted as the decoy."

"It…wasn't?"

Ras's eyes went wide. His mind flashed back to the gruesome scenes he witnessed that fateful night. A battlefield ravaged by a dragon. A ruined violet Chasseur, the princess's personal unit. The crushed cockpit and the long silver hair that hung out of it. Hair so instantly recognizable, it was practically a symbol of the princess to the entire realm.

"You're lying," said Ras. "It was her. It had to be. I saw the wreckage of the *Ella* with my own two eyes. You know as well as I do that only those of imperial blood can pilot that Chasseur. That's exactly why it worked as a decoy: The federation knew it wasn't a trick; that a member of the imperial family had to be inside."

"You're right on that point, Ras," said Auriol, his voice dropping to a whisper. "But there were two of us on the battlefield that day."

This time, Ras couldn't speak.

The Chasseurs of the imperial family were imbued with minds of their own, and refused to carry those without imperial blood. But conversely, that meant any member of Auriol's family could have piloted the *Ella* that day, not just Princess Fiarca.

"Y-you mean…," Ras stuttered, "it was…Aur? Auriol piloted the *Ella* in his sister's place…?"

"That is the truth of what happened that day, two years ago."

The person before Ras, the person who had introduced themself as Crown Prince Auriol, reached for their mask. Unhooking it, they removed the covering from their face.

There was no horrific wound. There was only a face of peerless beauty. Freed from the auramancy technique contained within the mask, the wearer's sapphire eyes returned to their natural violet hue.

Ras, his voice trembling, spoke her name.

"Fiarca…"

The imperial princess gave Ras a smile. A smile he thought he'd never see again.

"It's me, Ras. And now I can finally talk to you as myself once more."

The woman undid her hair tie and shook her head, allowing a river of silver to flow over her shoulders, like a silver flower unfurling its petals. Her hair was a little shorter than Ras remembered, leading him to believe she must have cut it two years ago, shortly after her presumed death.

Princess Fiarca was still alive.

Instead, her twin brother had died, and Fiarca had taken his place. She became the crown prince and led her nation in his absence.

"Now you know," she said. "You know why I've asked this task of you. If my marriage to Princess Tishna goes ahead, my secret will not survive the wedding night. Before that happens, you must win her over. One way or another, she needs to remain our nation's ally."

Fiarca Jeva Argenteia stared into Ras's eyes.

Ras reached for his glass, brought it to his lips, and downed its contents in one gulp. There was so much emotion whirling around in his head that he couldn't find it in himself to speak. All he wanted to do was drink so much he didn't have to remember this feeling.

And so Sir Ras Talion was treated to a lovers' reunion he never could have expected.

3

"Time to wake up, Fi."

Ras leaned over and shook the imperial princess's shoulder. Still half-buried in blankets atop the bed, Fiarca reluctantly opened her eyes and looked up at Ras with a dreamy smile. Her expression was like a silver flower in bloom, and her childish grin was a far cry from the usual shrewd princess Ras knew.

"I was waiting for a kiss from a charming prince," she said, in the voice of one still half asleep.

The loose chemise she was wearing as bedclothes revealed glimpses of her pale skin. As much as Ras wanted to run his fingers along her skin, he refrained.

"Sorry, but I'm not in the mood," he said with a sigh. "My head's still reeling after yesterday."

"Really? How come?"

"My dead lover came back to life, and I learned that my friend took her place and died. It takes time to adjust to something like that."

Fiarca exhaled a long breath, then laughed teasingly. "Are you mad at me?" she asked. "Mad I never told you all this time?"

A scowl appeared on Ras face. "Of course I am. You kept me in the dark for two whole years."

"Well, I have something to say about that," said Fiarca, pouting. "How many times do you think I tried to contact you? You had no right to start visiting brothels, no matter how dead you thought I was. Not even that, but you started going after other women as well? I was mortified when I read the reports. And while you were off fooling around, I was stuck here doing my brother's work day after day."

"Oh, well, er…"

Ras couldn't meet her eyes, and he appeared embarrassed.

"I have no excuse for that," he said at last. "I won't begrudge you your anger."

"Well, it's not your fault—it's Fon Cigel's. And to be honest, it did help me out a little."

"How so?" asked Ras, intrigued.

Still splayed out on the bed, Fiarca gave him a hopeless smile.

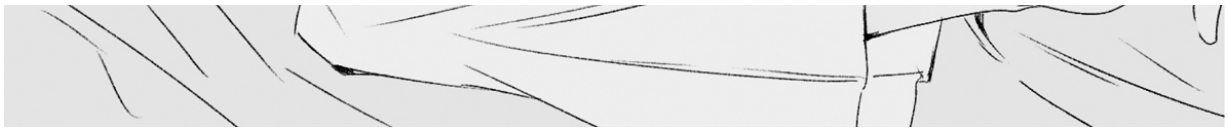
"Well, who would think I was still alive after seeing how you drowned your miseries with women? Thanks to you, nobody suspected a thing."

"I see."

"But that doesn't mean I'm not angry about it. We've got a lot to make up for, you know."

Fiarca narrowed her violet eyes at Ras, who instinctively took a step back.





"What do you want from me?" he asked.

"Let's see. You can start by giving me a kiss."

Fiarca held out her arms invitingly, and the smile on her lips became playful.

4

"By the way, should you really be dressed like that?" asked Ras, watching the princess drink her morning soup with her long hair still undone.

After pulling him in for a kiss, Fiarca had forced Ras to carry her to the lounge, and now the princess seemed to be in high spirits. She was wearing unisex underclothes, along with a man's tunic, but while these were enough to cover her modest curves, it was unlikely anyone looking at her would mistake her for a man. Yes, these were the crown prince's private quarters, but anyone could still come in. There was no telling what might happen, and if anyone realized the princess wasn't dead after all, there would be chaos.

"It's okay," said Fiarca. "Actually, it's worse if I get caught changing into my disguise. If anyone sees me like this, I can just pretend to be Elmira."

"I see," said Ras. "So that's why she looks so much like you."

"Yes. Well, she was originally supposed to be my body double. It's much safer to be a princess if I have someone who can go out in my place, you see. It's just too bad I had to fake my death before any of that became useful."

"You don't say."

Originally, nobody was meant to even know that Elmira existed, but after the crown prince's death, her and Fiarca's roles were reversed. Elmira was dragged into the limelight to play the role of Auriol's aide, while Fiarca was forced to live a secretive life in her shadow.

"But even if you pass yourself off as Elmira, what if somebody comes into Auriol's bedroom and sees 'Elmira' sleeping there?

Wouldn't that be a problem?"

"Not at all. We've secretly put out word that Elmira is the crown prince's mistress. That way, she can come and go as she pleases."

"…I suppose that makes sense. It's a bit harsh on poor Elmira, though."

While no one would dare speak out against her actions for fear of offending the crown prince, this arrangement made it seem like Elmira had slept her way to the top. It was a stain on her reputation that was wholly undeserved.

"I wish it didn't have to be that way," said Fiarca, casting her gaze down regretfully. "Not to mention what people are saying about Aur since his lover so resembles his late sister…"

Elmira's job required her to be a princess look-alike. It didn't escape anyone's notice how Auriol's new lover just so happened to resemble his late sister. It may have been the only way for Fiarca to fill her brother's shoes, but that didn't mean she didn't feel sorry about besmirching his good name.

"Did you really have to do all this?" asked Ras, biting into the fresh bread that Shishka had brought. "What's wrong with just staying as who you are?"

The Argyll Empire did not prohibit female heirs. On paper, all Auriol's death should have meant was Fiarca moving up the line of succession. The loss of their young prince would be a bitter blow to the nation, but hardly an insurmountable one.

But Fiarca shook her head sadly.

"Just imagine what would have happened if we hadn't covered up Aur's death," she said.

"You mean…there would have been consequences?"

"Yes. First, our marriage would have gone ahead, and you would have become a member of the imperial family."

"Would I have? Hmm, I suppose you're right."

At the time of Auriol's death, Ras and Fiarca had been betrothed. Both were members of noble houses, so the marriage was allowed,

but Fiarca would have needed to renounce her right to succession and join Ras's house, being granted new land and a new title.

With Auriol's death, however, Fiarca could no longer leave her nation without an heir. The only way they could stay together would be for Ras to join the imperial family.

"If I became the empress," said Fiarca, "then our child would be the next heir. In other words, the future emperor or empress of this nation would be the grandchild of Count Veredica. That puts the balance of the Council in a very fragile position. The other houses are not likely to take it lying down."

"I see what you mean. Whereas, if Aur was the emperor, they would all at least have the chance to offer their daughters' hands as concubines."

"Precisely. As soon as Aur's death became public, Veredica would be guaranteed influence over this nation's future. The only way for someone to prevent that would be to assassinate either one of us. But…"

"…If you die, then the nation is plunged into a succession dispute, while anyone who tries to kill me risks making an enemy of both our houses."

"Either way," said Fiarca coldly, "civil war is the most likely outcome. And with that inevitability, the Council may decide they'd rather make the first move."

Ras grimaced. The future the princess described seemed all too plausible.

"Were my family in a more stable position," said Fiarca, "we wouldn't have to do all this. Unfortunately, this couldn't have come at a worse time. The previous war of succession deprived us of heirs, and Father's health is declining fast. Plus, the war with the Padyne Federation all but eradicated our nation's military."

"All the ingredients for a revolution," Ras noted.

"Quite. So you see, I had to do whatever I could to ensure Aur lived on."

"Hence the cross-dressing. You make a convincing Aur, I'll give you that."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" said the princess, folding her arms across her meager chest. She shot Ras a nasty glare, but Ras still couldn't help but be amused. The disappointing figure Fiarca had so lamented back in the day was working in her favor now.

"It wasn't all smooth sailing," Fiarca explained. "Luckily, Aur wasn't much taller than me, so it wasn't hard to match his height with some false-bottomed shoes. As for my voice, there's a tiny device inside my mask that lowers the pitch, and auramancy changes the color of my eyes. Elmira's been teaching me how to act more like a man; the Silver Fangs possess quite a knack for disguise, it seems."

"So how many people are in on all this?" Ras asked.

"Elmira and Kanalayka know, as does Shishka. Then there's Davrota, the prime minister, and finally my father. Five people—plus you and me, of course."

"That's all? None of the other servants or guards around the palace have realized you're not the crown prince?"

"Not a single one," said Fiarca, proudly puffing out her chest. "And the fewer people who know, the easier it is to keep it that way."

Ras nodded, frowning.

The emperor and the prime minister, if anything, had even more reason to keep quiet than Fiarca did. As for Kanalayka, she was Davrota's daughter and shared his motivations, while Elmira had been raised from birth to be the princess's body double. Finally, Shishka was the daughter of an impoverished house. She had more than enough reason to remain loyal to her employers. Thanks to all of them, Fiarca's secret had managed to remain safe.

"The problems begin when we add the princess of Charlgia into the mix," said Ras, finally understanding the gravity of the issue facing the imperial family.

Unlike those already in on it, Princess Tishna had no reason to cooperate. In fact, it was readily imaginable that she might resent being married off to a woman in disguise.

"If anyone runs the risk of leaking my secret, it's her," agreed Fiarca, a fragile smile upon her lips. "We have no way of enforcing silence upon a princess from a foreign nation."

"And what happens if she talks?"

"Right now, we're very lucky to be in the people's good graces. Even if the other houses wanted to, they'd find it difficult to stir up discontent. However, much of that good grace rests upon the noble sacrifice of the dearly departed Princess Fiarca, and Auriol's subsequent rally on the front lines."

"When in fact," said Ras, taking over, "it was Auriol who died, and the princess was impersonating him, pulling the wool over the eyes of her own subjects for two long years."

"If that came to light, the Council would have little trouble finding enough malcontents to start a rebellion. With our nation as weak as it is, the quicker they strike, the better."

"So Kanalayka was right all along," muttered Ras. "The fate of the empire really is at stake."

One little lie was the last rotten support beam propping up a crumbling nation. If Fiarca's identity was discovered, the whole country's peace would come crashing down.

"That is why Princess Tishna must cooperate with us," said Fiarca. "That's where you come in, Stallion. I want you to be the leverage that convinces her to keep quiet."

"What, you want her to fall so madly in love with me that she'll do anything? I'm not a miracle worker, you know."

"You have a track record, don't you? Whom was it who exposed the leader of Prouss's most prominent smuggling ring by prying information out of his mistress? What about getting a nobleman's wife to hand over crucial evidence incriminating her husband?"

"All that pales in comparison to this. The fate of the empire is at stake here."

"I'd have thought you'd be a bit happier about it, Ras. You have my express permission to cheat on me as much as you like."

Fiarca's brazen declaration stunned Ras into silence.

Naturally, with the princess's death, her and Ras's marriage could not go ahead, and it was canceled. Therefore, technically it wasn't adultery no matter whom he slept with. However, Fiarca seemed to act as though the two of them were still engaged, and Ras could only assume her love for him remained. Besides, he couldn't deny he also felt the same way.

"Don't worry," said Fiarca. "Don't forget you were the man who charmed *me*. Compared to that, winning over some provincial maiden should be child's play, don't you think?"

"Hmm, that's strange. It sounded like you were trying to flatter me, but you ended up boasting about yourself instead."

"The point is, I have everything under control. Just do your best for me, okay?"

The princess's words sounded frivolous, but Ras understood the conviction underpinning them was genuine. The mass deception of her people was necessary for Argyll's future, and Fiarca was ready to do whatever it took to ensure that deception continued.

The only obstacle she couldn't handle by herself was Princess Tishna, and it was for that reason she had turned to Ras. He was the only one she could trust. For all her levity, Princess Fiarca was desperate.

For her sake, Ras pretended not to notice any of this. Instead, he lazily scratched the back of his head.

"So?" he said. "What now? I can't exactly walk up to the royal castle and demand an introduction."

Fiarca's expression became serious as she launched into her explanation.

"One month from now, there's going to be a council in Charlgia for all members of the Shrumland Alliance. I will be attending—as Auriol, of course—on behalf of His Majesty, and there I will meet the beautiful Princess Tishna and fall instantly in love." Fiarca grinned. "A cute little tale for the realm's chatterboxes," she added.

"And as a Guardian of Silver, I'll be there to meet her, too," concluded Ras.

"Precisely. Which means you'll have to play a convincing performance until then. It wouldn't do for some upstart knave to accompany the crown prince on his travels—especially one with a reputation like yours."

"All right. I think I know what to do, then."

Fiarca looked a little taken aback.

"You mean you have a plan?"

"No. But I don't think I'll need one. Trouble will be coming my way soon enough."

With a weary sigh, Ras indicated the imperial guardsman uniform he was wearing. A look of understanding spread across Fiarca's face.

Four days later, a man came and requested a meeting with Ras, introducing himself as a major general of Central Command.



CHAPTER 3 The Stallion Knight Riles Up Central Command

1

"I'm beginning to lose my patience, Kanalayka."

Ras was lounging on a couch, idly gazing out the window. He was in a waiting room in one of the palace watchtowers that was reserved especially for members of the Imperial Guard. It was a room sorely lacking in style, possessing only a desk for doing work, a meticulously arranged filing cabinet, and a couple of other essentials.

Ras and Kanalayka were the only two present. Fiarca, in her guise as the crown prince, had been busy all morning, tied up with official business in her office at the front of the palace. Imperial guards were already posted there, so Ras was left with nothing to do.

"I'm sorry, Ras," said Kanalayka. "Usually, you'd have your own legion to lead by now, but we're still working out the details on that, I'm afraid."

On paper, the commander of the Imperial Guard was Crown Prince Auriol. As was common in these sorts of cases, the title was purely ceremonial, and in practice, it was the imperial legate Kanalayka who issued orders to the troops. As a result, she was swamped with work even now, while Ras lounged empty-handed in the corner. She didn't feel good about it, either, but there was nothing she could do.

"I don't care about that," Ras replied with a sigh. "But if there's no pressing business, then why can't I go back to Prouss? Fon's

probably wondering where I am by now. If I don't let her know, it's not going to be pretty."

It was roughly two hundred kilometers from Prouss to the imperial capital. Not doable to cross in a single night without a method of air travel like the Caladrius, but two days on a civilian camion truck would be more than enough to make the round trip.

Kanalayka raised an eyebrow. "Does Fon Cigel usually worry about your whereabouts?"

"No," said Ras, shaking his head. "It's not me she's worried about—it's all the money I owe."

"You owe her money?"

"My brothel tab is just the beginning. I don't get free room and board just because I'm her student, you know."

"Oh…I see." Kanalayka looked back down at her desk. Now that he mentioned it, Ras had said something before about his debt to the brothel being the reason he had to take on so many odd jobs. "Well, I can't say anything about this debt of yours," she said at last, "but at the very least, Fon Cigel should have received news of your appointment by now. I ordered one of my men to inform her in person."

For some reason, this didn't reassure Ras nearly as much as Kanalayka had hoped.

"A man?" he asked, sitting up suddenly. "Did you say a man?"

"Well, I could hardly send one of my women into a house of ill repute, could I?"

"Is he good-looking?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, shit. Do you know what you've done? You might not get him back in one piece, you know."

Kanalayka looked at him, bewildered. "What do you mean by that?" she asked.

But Ras only shook his head sadly. "It might already be too late. You've sent fresh meat right into the dragon's den."

"B-but he's…"

"He's exactly what they're all starving for, that's what. I just hope the poor guy makes it out alive… Still, I suppose that should satisfy Fon for a while. You've done me a good turn."

Ras lay back once again, relaxed and wearing a carefree smile. Kanalayka, on the other hand, was beginning to sweat.

"I'm more worried about what I've done to my messenger…," she muttered.

"Well, anyway, with that monkey off my back, I really don't have anything to do," said Ras. "Perhaps I'll go out, finally see the sights of the imperial city."

"Shouldn't you be keeping on top of your training instead? Would you like to spar with me, perhaps?"

"Sparring, hmm? Hmm, not really in the mood."

"And why not?" asked Kanalayka. "Am I not good enough for you?"

"That's not the case at all, Kanalayka. I've seen what you can do. You can probably give even the whores at Fon's brothel a run for their money."

"I've been meaning to ask," said Kanalayka, narrowing her eyes. "These…prostitutes…who work for Fon Cigel… Am I to understand they are all disciples of the Black Blade as well?"

"Don't worry," said Ras. "She's not training her own secret army or anything. Fon's techniques aren't for taking down human opponents anyway."

"They're not? Then what are they for?"

"Isn't it obvious? They're for felling those whom other men can't."

Ras's cryptic reply was accompanied by a wave of darkness that seemed to seep from his every pore. It stunned Kanalayka into silence.

Aura knights were originally trained to fight and kill not their fellow humans but the monstrous beasts that threatened them. Their techniques, their specialized swords, their Chasseurs—all of these were developed to make up for mankind's inherent weakness against the fiends.

Ras's words were a scathing condemnation of the very concept of the Imperial Guard, trained as they were to protect the empire's interests and nothing else. That was why Ras had no interest in learning anything Kanalayka had to teach.

"I see," said the imperial legate when she'd regained her composure. "You're a fascinating man, Ras. I really think we ought to spar after all."

Behind her serious expression, her eyes were twinkling, and her cheeks were even starting to get a little flushed.

"Weren't you listening to a word I said? I said I'm not interested."

"But I am, Ras. I'm interested in seeing what *you* have to teach *me*. In fact, why don't we get some of the legion together and hold a little seminar?"

Ras could sense Kanalayka growing excited at the thought, and wasn't sure how to make her stop. He feared he might have been a little too convincing, or Kanalayka a little too gullible. Even if he was right, was it not a problem for the imperial legate to be so easily swayed?

But just as Ras was about to voice these misgivings, he held his tongue. For without a word, two men whom Ras had never seen before had entered the room.

"Did my ears deceive me," said the first, "or did I just hear tell of the imperial legate herself seeking instruction?"

The man was a moderately older fellow sporting magnificent red facial hair groomed in the shape of a lion's mane. Accompanying him was a muscular younger gentleman. Both of them were wearing the black-and-red uniform of Central Command.

"We would be most honored by the opportunity to receive your tutelage as well, Sir Ras Talion."

The red-haired gentleman shot Ras a cheeky grin. Ras took note of the major-general insignia pinned to his breast.

2

"Major General Hunlahan!" exclaimed Kanalayka, looking up at the red-haired man. "What brings you here?"

Argyll Central Command was a branch of the armed forces that answered directly to the emperor. Even though their numbers had been decimated in the Yura Uprising, they were still the largest of any army in the empire.

Its chain of command differed from that of the Imperial Guard, but the two organizations were closely knit. In fact, many guardsmen and -women had originally come from Central Command, and Kanalayka herself was one such example.

Despite this closeness, it was still rare for one with the rank of major general to come all the way to the imperial barracks without a reason. Something must have happened, and Kanalayka couldn't sit still without knowing what it was.

"Ahhh, don't let me interrupt what you were doing, Lady Aluarche," said the bearded man with a cordial smile. "It's just, I heard a fascinating rumor and simply had to see for myself."

With that, he stepped toward Ras, who was still lying on the sofa, and stuck out his right hand.

"Gaherris Hunlahan, my good man, commander of the 2nd Cavalry Division, at your service. I went through the academy with your uncle, you know. Mmm, yes, Viscount Kennet Clayfe. Oh, he told me all about you."

"Pleasure," said Ras, ignoring his remarks. Instead, he returned the handshake. He soon realized that Major General Hunlahan was channeling enough aura into his hand to crush Ras's bones, but the young aura knight weathered this display of dominance without even breaking a sweat. By manipulating his own aura, he disrupted the major general's flow and neutralized the technique.

What took Ras by surprise was something else. If Hunlahan was to be believed, and he really went through military school at the same

time as Ras's uncle, Viscount Kennet Clayfe Hermehion, then the man couldn't have been much older than his midthirties.

This completely blew away Ras's expectations—not because the major general's rank was impressive for his years, but rather because it meant the man was at least a decade younger than his physical appearance suggested.

Completely unsuspecting of the impolite thoughts rattling around in Ras's brain, the major general grinned, revealing an impressive array of pearly whites. Ras could only assume the handshake had been a test, one he had apparently passed.

"Very good," said Hunlahan. "I see His Highness wasn't lacking in judgment after all. So it wasn't a fluke, then? Taking down that big winged blighter?"

"Apologies, Major General, but I'm not sure what you're getting at."

Kanalayka had been content to sit quietly throughout the interaction so far, but at this point, she cleared her throat.

"Mr. Hunlahan," she said, "do you not think a Guardian of Silver deserves a little more respect?"

"Right you are, ma'am," said Hunlahan without any loss of enthusiasm. "Apologies, Mr. Talion, I've been quite rude."

Without waiting for an invitation, the major general sat down on the sofa opposite Ras.

"The reason I've come," he said, "is because I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor?"

"Precisely. I'd like to ask that you engage my division in a contest. It shouldn't constitute much trouble for a man of your capabilities."

Hunlahan kept up that indefatigable grin. Ras scrutinized the man's expression closely.

"Are you trying to test me, Major General?"

"If you want to put it that way, then yes," Hunlahan admitted. "You see, under normal circumstances, members of the Imperial Guard are picked from among the most highly distinguished officers in

Central Command. Those who go on to become Guardians of Silver are the most famed and prestigious of all our ranks. And yet we've heard nothing of your skills, Mr. Talion, save for rumors."

"I couldn't agree more, Major General." Ras grinned and crossed his legs. "And what happens if I fail this test? Will you go to His Highness and demand I be stripped of my title?"

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of questioning His Highness's judgment," said Hunlahan, jovially shaking his head. "It's the troops, you see. They're not as understanding as I am, and I was hoping you could give them all a good kick in the hindquarters for me."

"Right. So it's not about pluck or prestige; you just want to see me win a fight."

"I suppose that's one way of putting it, yes."

Hunlahan shrugged and turned to the other gentleman standing behind him, an aura knight who looked about as old as Ras but was a little taller and rather more broad-shouldered. The muscles of his biceps seemed ready to burst out of his sleeves.

"Who's he?" Ras asked, but it was the gentleman himself who answered, without waiting for the major general's introduction.

"Lieutenant Custer Farrell, sir. I look forward to seeing you in battle, sir."

"A lieutenant? A silver-rank cavalryman. I see…"

Ras shot the young man an appraising look.

The cavalry was composed of aura knights who rode military Chasseurs, and after a short period of internship, each was assigned a rank, along with a matching colored insignia on their uniform. This was known colloquially among the troops as their "wooberg," owing to the colors, which, after gold, silver, and bronze, went white (W), blue (U), black (B), red (R), and green (G).

A silver-rank cavalryman was second only to a gold, meaning this Custer gentleman had already accomplished many deeds and he was no doubt expected to go on to accumulate countless more accolades.

Ras simply sighed and shook his head.

"Hmm, a bit lacking if you ask me."

"I…beg your pardon?"

"Have you got something against auramancy? You'll need more than just fancy swordplay if you want to be an aura knight. I can introduce you to a good teacher if you like."

Lieutenant Farrell shot Ras an annoyed glare. "What are you trying to say, exactly?" he asked.

The man took pride in his chiseled physique, and Ras's complete dismissal of its value had infuriated him. An aura knight, however, had no need to build muscle. They enhanced their physical strength with aura, and this was what allowed them to close the gap between the might of humans and that of the fiends. This enhancement was so stark that it hardly mattered at all how muscular the user was. Plus, a bulkier build obstructed the flow of aura and hindered the auramancer more than it helped them.

"I'll admit you have some talent," said Ras, "but it's not going to take you any further if you keep on like this. You've felt it, too, haven't you? That feeling of being stuck at a dead end, like you've been trying to make progress but you just can't."

"Are you trying to insult me?"

"I'm trying to help you make better use of your talents, Lieutenant. If you don't want to listen to me, then don't. It's your life."

Completely unruffled, Ras turned back to Hunlahan.

"Very well, Major General. A sortie with the 2nd Division it is."

"Ras?" said Kanalayka, looking shocked. Given Ras's blatant lack of enthusiasm throughout the proceedings, she couldn't have possibly expected him to accept. "I know combat drills between Central Command and the Imperial Guard are a regular occurrence, but…are you sure?"

"I'd have to prove myself sooner or later," said Ras. "Besides, it's a hell of a lot more palatable to risk my life for the empire when it's alongside someone I trust, and I'm sure your soldiers feel the same way."

Ras turned to Hunlahan, a suspiciously crafty smile on his lips.

"So how many of them are you willing to lose?" he asked.

"Wha—?!"

Custer had been content to glare silently at Ras, but this incendiary remark made the young man's face go bright red with anger.

"I'm not saying I want to cripple your military," said Ras. "It's just…I must prove my worthiness beyond all doubt, and the only way to do that is without reducing my victory to a referee's decision. I'm prepared to put my life on the line, but can your soldiers say the same?"

"Hmm."

Hunlahan pondered the issue. Putting aside whether Ras could really defeat an entire division of aura knights, he had to admit there was a grain of truth to the man's words.

"In that case," he said, "might I suggest a mock battle using Chasseurs? So long as we forbid direct attacks on the cockpit, the lives of my troops shall be in little danger."

"Fine by me," said Ras. "One problem, though: I don't have a Chasseur I can use. They only dragged me here the other day, you see."

Ras directed a resentful look at Kanalayka, who averted her gaze.

A Chasseur was more than just a machine. To the owner of a custom-made unit, it was a symbol of their noble class and an embodiment of their duty: to safeguard their people against the monstrous fiends. As such, it was common practice for aristocrats appointed to the imperial cavalry to bring their own Chasseur, crafted by their kinsmen and passed down through their house. This way, they swore their oath to the emperor in the presence of their noble ancestors.

However, owing to his sudden abduction, Ras did not have his unit with him. It was still in the stables of the Veredica town house back in Prouss.

But even so, Hunlahan did not back down. “We have some standard-issue models back at the barracks,” he said. “Might be a hair less impressive than what you’re used to, but if it pleases you, I can have them fitted right away.”

“Can you, now?” said Ras, raising an eyebrow. “You don’t mind stretching the budget for me?”

The cost to produce and maintain a single Chasseur was off the charts, and even in a mock battle, the frame was sure to take heavy damage. The repair bills would be enormous. Not an easy sum to dismiss, even for the imperial army.

Hunlahan furrowed his brow and grinned awkwardly. “I think we can cover about five or six units if we dip into the emergency funds,” he said.

Ras was a little surprised at how far the man was willing to go to test Ras’s skill. “Fine,” he said. “Then I’ll take one, and you can have the other five. Fight me one at a time or all at once—it makes no difference.”

It sounded like he thought even this might not present a significant challenge. “You really mean to take us all on by yourself?” asked Hunlahan with an unamused frown. “You’re not even going to have the legate on your side?”

But Ras only shook his head.

“It’s hardly a test of my mettle if I have to ask for help.”

“He’s mocking us!” muttered Custer indignantly. Ras shot him a knowing look.

“Very observant, Lieutenant. By the way, do you have a sister? I wouldn’t mind an introduction. Maybe *after* I win this battle, hmm?”

“You want me to wager my own kin’s purity?!” Reading magnificently into Ras’s words, Custer exploded. “You honorless cur! You’re just as depraved as they say! A brute like you has no business leading the Imperial Guard, and I look forward to proving as much on the field of war!”

“That’s quite enough, Lieutenant Farrell.”

Hunlahan stepped in, silencing his furious subordinate. He realized what Ras was trying to do and refused to be provoked.

"Very well, Mr. Talion. Let us say tomorrow afternoon, at four o'clock. The 2nd Division and I shall await you on the maneuvering grounds."

"Looking forward to it, Hunlahan. Let's see if Central Command's Cavalry Division is up to scratch."

With an unrepentant grin, Ras watched the two men go. At her wits' end, Kanalayka let out a deep sigh.

3

The 2nd Cavalry Division's maneuvering grounds were located approximately forty kilometers from the imperial city. Kanalayka arranged for transport to take them there.

Beyond the imperial city's walls, the earth was a barren wasteland. Vif Arger was fortunate enough to be situated near a large river tributary and lake, but more than 80 percent of the empire's lands had been rendered infertile. Of what little arable land remained, much of it was found amid precipitous mountains and other dangerous locales, such that less than a tenth of Argyll's land area was fit for human habitation.

And it wasn't only Argyll facing this problem. This rapid desertification affected the whole continent of Danakil. While more than half the continent was still capable of supporting life, many of those regions were dragon territory, and humanity had no hopes of settling there.

Whenever he looked out at the blasted landscape of his home continent, Ras was forced to reconcile an uncomfortable truth. Dragons were the true rulers of this land, and humans were just the feeble rats scurrying about in their shadows.

"What were you thinking, Ras?" asked Kanalayka, after a long and silent camion ride, just as a signboard came into view indicating the upcoming military installation.

Her pointed tone made it clear she wasn't requesting his opinions on the landscape. She was concerned about what Ras had gotten himself into.

"Don't blame me," Ras replied. "They challenged me, not the other way around."

Kanalayka sighed. Frowning, she shot Ras a wicked glare.

"That doesn't mean you had to set the stakes that high," she said. "The 2nd Division outnumbers you five to one. These are trained soldiers we're talking about. It's not the sort of drunken bar brawl you might be used to."

"It's because the major general let slip he could only cover six Chasseurs," Ras responded. "If I smash up five of them all at once, then I don't have to worry about him demanding a rematch."

"*That's* the reason?"

Kanalayka was dumbfounded, but the outcome Ras was trying to avoid was an altogether too plausible one. Even if he passed this test, Central Command would surely come up with some excuse to issue him another, and Ras couldn't stomach the thought of a tenure marked by endless challenges from the 2nd Division. His aim was to trounce the military so thoroughly that they wouldn't even think of crossing him again, and failing that, to leave them with so little matériel that they couldn't, even if they wanted to.

But if Ras failed this test, Central Command would make his life a waking nightmare. It was no wonder Kanalayka sounded as anxious as she did.

"Come to think of it," said Ras, "what exactly is this 2nd Cavalry Division anyway? I don't remember it being there when I was with Central Command."

At least on paper, Ras had been a soldier of the imperial army for two years, ever since his graduation from an imperial academy at the age of seventeen, and all the way up to the Yura Uprising and his subsequent retirement.

However, Ras had been part of an experimental task force, not the main army, and thus there was much about the military's inner

workings he didn't quite understand.

"That's because it was created after the Yura Uprising, at Her Highness's suggestion," explained Kanalayka. "You see, the soldiers at Central Command are well trained but sadly unversed in live combat."

"I see," said Ras. "So the 2nd Division holds the combat veterans."

As the empire's shield against foreign aggression, the soldiers at Central Command very rarely left imperial territory. Instead, trade routes were policed by militias of the four marquises, while the three counts were responsible for securing borders.

For many at Central Command, the Yura Uprising was their first taste of a real combat situation, and the army performed far worse than expected. Unreliable intel, contradictory orders, and delays in the supply chain were the least of the troubles. The most damning realization of all was that, when thrust into a life-and-death situation for the first time, many soldiers failed to reach their fullest potential.

The 2nd Division was built on the back of this realization, and the soldiers in the unit experienced life on the borderlands before coming back to drill the 1st Division on what they'd learned. This way, the entire imperial army could share the benefits that came from live combat.

And so Argyll's military was reformed into a coherent, well-oiled war machine, just the way Princess Fiarca liked it.

Kanalayka sighed. "Anyway, if you wanted to prove yourself," she said, "all you had to do was challenge the major general to a duel. He earned his stripes with the South Sea militia—defeating him should be more than enough to silence any dissenting voices."

The South Sea militia was the border guard belonging to the county that bordered the Orange Ocean at the southern tip of the empire's territory. The militia was responsible for repelling pirate raids and responding to transgressions into imperial lands. The county was famously one of the most dangerous areas in Argyll, which in turn made Hunlahan one of the most respected men in the

army. If Ras even fought the man to a tie, that would be more than enough to secure his credentials as a Guardian of Silver.

However, so long as he was being pressured to fight, Ras wanted something more for his troubles. If he was going to seduce a princess of Charlgia, he needed enough fame to consign to oblivion the reputation he earned from his days as the Stallion.

"I promised Fiarca I'd make a new name for myself," said Ras. "It might only be a practice match, but what better way to do that than by beating unbeatable odds?"

"And that's why you went out of your way to anger Lieutenant Farrell?"

Kanalayka fell silent for a moment, letting Ras's words sink in.

"Even so," she said at last, "it sounds unreasonable. How are you planning on counteracting the effects of long-term Chasseur combat? What about particle exhaustion?"

"You let me worry about that," said Ras, and just as he said it, a large domed building came into view. It was the stable, a giant hangar where Chasseurs were stored and maintained. Inside, about twenty of the units were lined up, each parked in a kneeling position, while busy maintenance crewmen and -women rushed this way and that. One of them noticed Kanalayka stopping her vehicle outside the hangar doors. He was a slim, lanky young man with disheveled hair.

"There you are, ma'am," he said. "We've been awaiting your visit."

"Izai," Kanalayka replied. "Thank you for receiving us today."

The two greeted each other warmly yet courteously. It was clear the pair were bound by mutual respect.

"This is Izai," said Kanalayka, turning to Ras. "He's the Tuner in charge of all the empire's Chasseurs, including the Imperial Guard's."

The engineer scratched his head, a little embarrassed by something, then turned to Ras.

"Long time no see," he said. "I have to say, I didn't think they'd really let you into the Imperial Guard."

"Me neither. You haven't changed, Izai."

“Oh, do you two know each other?” Kanalayka asked, noting the familiarity in their tone.

“We were in Dark Horse together,” said Ras.

“Dark Horse?” replied Kanalayka, tilting her head.

That was not their official designation, and Kanalayka had studied on the southern continent, so it was no surprise she didn’t recognize the name, but neither Ras nor Izai picked this time to elaborate. There was more important business on both their minds.





"I heard I'll be borrowing one of your Chasseurs," said Ras.

"Pick whichever one you want," replied Izai, casting a glance around the hangar bay. "The major general says he doesn't want you complaining we gave you a faulty unit."

Most of the units were already fitted for battle. If Ras chose one himself, he couldn't claim it had been sabotaged.

"How thoughtful of the man. You wouldn't know it from looking at him."

"A bit harsh, Ras."

Izai shook his head. His gentle, slightly timid personality was just how Ras remembered him. Yet his engineering skills were top of the line. The empire's Chasseurs were in good hands.

A single unit stood at a height of around nine meters, and its graceful, flowing form made it look more like a work of art than a tool of war. Like a sculptured Valkyrie in an armored battle dress.

The other striking thing about it, besides its height and beauty, were the elongated bladelike spines that sprouted from its back like wings. The dozens of units in the hangar were all the same model, but even so, the number and placement of these spines differed on each one. Each was geared toward a different combat specialty.

"Ah, the *Gent*," said Ras, looking around at the dormant Chasseurs. "Brings back memories."

The *Gent* was a standard-issue Chasseur model developed on the southern continent and shipped across the Orange Ocean to Argyll. It could be fitted for a very wide range of tactical uses, and as a result saw active service across the realm. Ras had ridden it back at the academy more times than he could count.

"Yes. As you can imagine, the *Elysia* hasn't quite passed clearance yet," said Izai wryly.

The *Elysia* was a new model that was only just beginning to replace the *Gent*. However, many more units would need to be produced before the state-of-the-art Chasseur could form the backbone of Central Command.

"That's fine," said Ras. "I'll go with this one. Can you get it tuned up?"

"You sure?" replied Izai with an amused grin. "That's quite an old unit."

Ras had chosen the unit with the longest combat record in the entire hangar. Chasseurs didn't deteriorate over time, but neither did the unit's age confer any advantage. Izai was curious as to why Ras would go out of his way to pick it.

"It's fitted for battle, isn't it? Then what's the problem?"

"As you wish, Ras. I'll get it set up for you right away."

Izai ran off toward the lockers to fetch his tools. For maximum efficiency, Ras's Chasseur had to be adjusted before use to match his height and proportions.

"Just what are you planning, Ras?" whispered Kanalayka, once she was sure nobody else could overhear. "Are you sure I can trust you? If you lose this fight, it'll completely ruin Her Highness's plans."

"Hmm. I guess that *would* be a problem," answered Ras. The irresponsible response only worried Kanalayka even more.

4

To her people, Fiarca Jeva Argenteia was known as the Silver Bloom. She was beautiful, wise, and benevolent. The young people of the country, no matter their sex, title, or social standing, looked up to her, and Custer Farrell, the silver-rank cavalryman of Central Command, was no exception.

Though they were in different years and rarely spoke, Custer had seen the princess many times during his time at the academy, and the sight of her beauty remained seared into his mind even now.

Custer's dream had been to become an imperial guard so he could protect and support Her Highness. For that reason, he poured everything into his training.

However, he soon learned that the princess would never return his affections.

She had a fiancé. Ras Talion Veredica, the third son of Count Veredica. He had been a good friend to Fiarca and her twin brother since the three of them were children.

The man's classroom results were stunning, and as much as it pained Custer to admit, Ras was extremely handsome as well. It was hard to look at him and the princess and pretend they didn't make a perfect pair.

It would be wrong to say Custer didn't feel a little envious of the man, but he never begrudged Ras his success, because the princess always seemed cheerful when she was with him.

Even when she lost her life two years ago, Custer never blamed Ras, as many people did. The princess sacrificed herself to a dragon, and Ras slew the beast in revenge. It was a tragic yet beautiful story…if the tale had ended there.

But it hadn't.

Ras had proceeded to resign from Central Command and spend his days frequenting whorehouses in Prouss, dragging his own good name through the mud.

At first, people overlooked his sins. He had just lost the love of his life and was turning to carnal pleasures to cope. But as the years dragged on and Ras showed no signs of changing his behavior, those sympathetic voices began to turn.

Ras had become known as the Stallion.

Many saw his fall from grace as a betrayal of the princess's memory. Auriol had lost his very own twin sister, a part of his soul, and yet he responded admirably, by redoubling his efforts toward the good of the realm. When compared to that, Ras's actions seemed deplorable.

And then Ras returned to the capital, to be made a Guardian of Silver. According to Custer, this was an unbelievably shortsighted blunder, and he wasn't the only one who thought so.

The upcoming test match was the perfect place for the soldiers of Central Command to vent their frustrations against Ras. Troop morale was at an all-time high.

"Custer…? Custer Farrell, are you listening?"

Sitting in the cockpit of his *Gent*, Custer received a transmission from his wingman, a bronze-rank cavalryman named Artos Calio. Artos was a classmate of Custer's and would be participating in the test match alongside him.

"What is it?" Custer replied.

"'What is it?' It's five minutes before the match begins, and you haven't told us our strategy yet. Did that son of a bitch really say he'd take us five against one?"

"Yeah," said Custer coldly. "One at a time or all at once, that's what he said."

He'd managed to calm down with time, but recalling Ras's words made his blood boil all over again. They were an affront to the entire 2nd Cavalry Division. Custer's hands began to tremble.

"*He's trying to shake us*," came the cynical voice of a third cavalryman, another bronze-rank named Stig Stenius. *"Either that, or he's already got an excuse up his sleeve for when he loses."*

This suggestion was new to Custer. He hadn't even considered a man could sink so low. Then Artos chimed in again, a little urgency in his voice.

"So? What are we doing? Who's deploying first?"

Custer's crew were gathered on the maneuvering grounds, awaiting the imminent start of their match. Ras's bold suggestion of a five-on-one had left all of them so stunned they hadn't made time to come up with a strategy yet. That said, Custer didn't imagine they'd need one. After a few seconds' thought, he voiced his idea.

"We'll all deploy at once," he said. "But only one of us at a time should approach."

"Hmm? Why?"

"Because it's obvious what Ras Talion is aiming for. He wants us to mess up and strike one another by mistake. It's easy to misread the situation when you're in the thick with five other Chasseurs."

"Oh. That's a good point."

"Still, the rest of us shouldn't stand around doing nothing. Remember, that whoreson took down a Greater Dragon. Pretend he's a Raptor-class fiend and act accordingly."

Trying not to let his anger get the better of him, Custer elaborated on his plan. A Raptor was a small fiend, only around seven to eight meters tall, but its agility and powerful strike made it a perfect predator to counter the bulky Chasseurs. It was almost impossible for a single unit to beat one without a squadron of teammates to back the unit up.

Stig's laugh came through the transmitter and he added, *"Even if he's only fighting us one at a time, he's bound to slip up if he has to keep watching his back."*

"Exactly."

"Decent plan. So who's going first?"

"I am. My unit's fitted with layered armor, so I'll get in close and keep him occupied. Then whoever ends up closest to the bastard can take a shot. Don't keep at it too long, though. Once you get off a hit, retreat to a safe distance. We'll whittle the bastard down."

"You really hate this guy, don't you, Custer?"

A new voice appeared on the radio. This was the fourth member of the team, Nero Hyrella. His entrance grades had been similar to Custer's when the two men first enlisted, and the man harbored a competitive spirit, which Custer resented having to deal with. Nero was a silver-rank cavalryman, just like Custer, so he was an important addition to the team.

"You're givin' him too much credit. The man's been away from active duty for two years. You sure you're not too worried about your sister to think straight?"

"Something wrong with my plan, Nero?"

"Let me handle the Stallion. Alone. We all know his plan is to make up excuses after he loses, so we're only playin' into his hand by gangin' up on him."

"…You might have a point," said Custer. "Do as you wish."

"I intend to."

With that, Nero cut his comms. Custer sighed and addressed the final member of his team.

"How about you, Rik?"

"I'll stick with you, Custer. I'm outfitted as a Caster, so I think that'll be most effective. Plus, I hate to do this to Nero, but if he goes in first, we can deduce a bit about how Ras Talion fights."

The voice of the bronze-rank cavalryman was calm and composed. His meek personality often led people to underestimate him, but Custer prized the man for his analytical prowess. That was why he had persuaded Rik to join the match, despite the man having little skin in the game.

"I'm still wondering why none of the older generation wanted to compete, though. At first I thought they were just shy about beating up someone they trained alongside…"

"You think it's something else?"

"I don't know. But perhaps it has something to do with Ras's old squad."

"Hmm. You think so?"

Custer suddenly felt vaguely uncomfortable.

Ras had been with Central Command up until two years prior. Naturally, there were those on the force who remembered him. And yet even after learning about his disparaging remarks, none of those older soldiers had been convinced to join the test match.

It was one thing if that was out of respect for their former comrade, but what if they were *afraid* of Ras instead?

"Unfortunately, I didn't have much time to look into it. All I found out about Ras's old squad was what they called it. Does the name Dark Horse mean anything to you?"

"Dark Horse…?"

Custer's brow furrowed. He couldn't quite place it, but he had a feeling he'd heard that name somewhere before. However, before he could figure it out, his thoughts were eclipsed by a deafening roar, like the howl of a beast mixed with the rumble of distant thunder—the sound of a Chasseur's engine.

Directing his gaze to the north, Custer spotted the ash-gray metal of Ras Talion's unit, which was kicking up a cloud of dust as it approached.

The cavalryman immediately put all thoughts out of his mind, save his hatred toward the man who had wronged him and the urge to face him in battle. Those two emotions simmered within him like lava.

"Looks like we're out of time."

"So it does."

Custer muttered his agreement, then booted up his own Chasseur. One by one, his allies followed suit, and all five of them began moving onto the maneuvering grounds.

It was a vast wasteland of rocks and sand over ten kilometers across. A proving ground for mechanical men. And today, the stage for a mortal struggle between six Chasseurs and their riders.

1

"Everyone seems very lively all of a sudden," said Fiarca while on one of her breaks. "Did something happen?"

A young clerk, bringing some papers to the study, paused when the crown prince addressed him.

"Yes, Your Highness," he said, suddenly looking a little embarrassed. "There's to be a test match between the Stallion—er, I mean, the Guardian of Silver and the men of the 2nd Cavalry Division. Some of us have begun making bets over who we think will win."

"A test match?" repeated Fiarca, raising an eyebrow, intrigued. "You mean here in the palace?"

Fiarca had predicted that Ras's sudden promotion would anger Central Command. Even the emperor's direct approval wasn't enough to wash away the doubt created by Ras's prior reputation. However, to their credit, the army men had chosen to challenge Ras directly, rather than resort to petty subterfuge to get their way. They might have been morally bankrupt in every other sense, but at least they had honor.

"We received a requisition request for the use of military Chasseurs on the 2nd Division's maneuvering grounds. They say Sir Talion intends to fight five units at once, Your Highness."

"Does he, now? I'd like to see that."

Fiarca clutched the black mask covering her mouth and chuckled.

Ras needed to win fame and glory as quickly as possible if he was to make a favorable impression on Princess Tishna at the summit in a month's time. This test match was the perfect opportunity to do that, and that was why Ras had set the bar so high.

It wouldn't have been impossible for a custom-made Chasseur to wipe out five standard-issue models, but Ras's unit was the same as the rest; it couldn't hope to mimic that feat. It didn't matter how skilled of a pilot he was, there was simply a physical limit to how far one could push a machine.

A Chasseur drew its power from particles known as aurons. During battle, it consumed these particles at an incredible rate. A Chasseur was only capable of operating at full power for half a minute or so before particle exhaustion struck. When this happened, the unit became extremely sluggish and unresponsive, eventually entering what was called shutdown, leaving it unable to move at all. In a battle between two Chasseurs, reaching shutdown meant the fight was as good as over.

This was the main reason why Chasseurs usually deployed in formations of multiple units. After the front line depleted their energy, they would retreat behind their comrades and recover.

Facing five foes at the same time, Ras would have no chance to replenish his aurons, nor would he have the liberty of fighting conservatively. Anyone could see that victory was a hopeless endeavor.

"Shall I ask them to stand down, ma'am?" asked Elmira, whispering into Fiarca's ear. "I can contact the 2nd Division by radio, if you'd like."

Ras's defeat was all but certain. In that case, it would be better to call the fight off and salvage his reputation.

Fiarca pondered the issue for a moment, then answered.

"No. Let them do as they wish," she said. "I'm more interested in hearing what the odds are on that bet he mentioned."

"It appears the most favored outcome is three kills for Sir Talion," said Elmira, passing Fiarca a scrap of paper listing all the wagers made so far. Only an agent as skilled as she could possibly have compiled such a comprehensive report on the off-record betting ring that had formed among the clerks of the palace.

"Oh, I see," said Fiarca. "So they're betting on how many foes Ras will take down before he loses. I have to say, three is a pretty generous assessment, all things considered."

The clerks' bets were surprisingly skewed in Ras's favor. Perhaps they respected the fact he once slew a Greater Dragon and was appointed directly to his position by the emperor. Still, nobody seemed to believe he could actually defeat all five of his opponents.

"I think I'll make a prediction as well," said the princess. "I don't have any small change on me, but I hope that's not a problem."

Picking up a pen, Fiarca scribbled her bet at the end of Elmira's list. She then passed the paper back to the silver-haired agent, along with a single gold coin. Elmira looked at what she'd written, and frowned.

"What is the meaning of this, Your Highness?" she asked. Fiarca simply smiled knowingly.

2

A Chasseur was a humanoid fighting machine approximately nine meters tall.

Its sleek and almost feminine appearance made it look more like a statue than a weapon, but beneath the hood, its inner workings more closely resembled the human body. It was composed of metal bones strung with synthetic muscle fibers, which could be controlled using aurons. These aurons were generated within the unit's core, and they responded to the aura of the pilot. This was the reason why aura knights and auramancers were chosen to sit in the cockpit. Through the application of their aura, a skilled pilot could command a lumbering Chasseur like it was their own flesh and blood.

"Response time seems smooth enough," murmured Ras to himself in the cockpit of his *Gent*. "Nice work, Izai."

The machine moved as he wished, with minimal delay, and there was no lag between the external sensors and Ras's mind's eye. The young engineer had done a commendable job despite the short span of time he was given.

Activated aurons spilled from Ras's unit, the *Gent-23*, taking the form of a crimson, fire-like glow that leaked through the seams in the armor plating. This roaring flame was constant and unwavering, a reflection not only of the tight tuning job but also of Ras's steady control.

With slick, unfaltering movements, the *Gent-23* rose to its feet. It was outfitted in a standard assault configuration, with no secondary armaments of any kind.

Lined up beside the unit was an array of primary weapons: a greatsword, a truncheon, a battle-ax, a short spear. All weapons that saw frequent use in Chasseur-on-Chasseur combat. There were even a small number of aura-powered rifles and ballistae.

However, Ras ignored them all. Instead, the *Gent-23* reached for a weapon mounted on the wall. Kanalayka's eyes widened in surprise as she watched from the hangar floor. Delighted by her reaction, Ras spurred the machine toward the maneuvering grounds.

◇◇◇◇

"A ceremonial sword…?" muttered Custer as he spotted what the approaching *Gent-23* had armed itself with. It was a rapier with a ceramic blade about six meters in length, decorated with an ornamental, basket-style cross guard.

"*The hell is that? He really is making fun of us*," came the astonished voice of Artos over the comms.

A ceremonial sword was designed for style, not combat. It didn't have a structure that would allow it to survive the kinds of impacts typically suffered in battle, and as a result, it was brittle and weak.

Of course, once energized with aura, the ceramic blade would be more than capable of slicing through a Chasseur's armor, but the narrow blade was extremely susceptible to being chipped, even against another ceramic blade. If the foe was outfitted with a heavy weapon like a mace, a rapier wouldn't survive more than a couple of clashes.

"I don't believe the man. As if a five-on-one fight isn't difficult enough, he's only gone and made things harder for himself by picking a fragile weapon like that. What is he thinking?"

"*Isn't it obvious, Rik? It's just one more thing to use as an excuse when he loses*," said Stig with a chuckle.

Of course, it was an aura knight's responsibility to pick an appropriate weapon for the battle. If Ras made a mistake, that would be on him. However, while it wouldn't excuse his loss entirely, it would certainly give him more ammunition. If Ras's silver tongue had got him all the way to the top, then he would surely find some way to use it.

"What a pathetic excuse for a man! I'll trounce him so soundly, no one will believe he ever stood a chance!"

"Wait, Nero! Come back!"

"You told me I could do as I wished, Custer Farrell, and that's just what I'm going to do!"

Nero fired the engines of his unit, the *Gent-6*, and broke ranks with his allies, leaving them all behind and sallying forth to meet Ras by himself. Nero's machine was outfitted with a large battle-ax over ten meters long, normally slow and difficult to wield, but Nero handled it like a professional. Its strengths were its exceptional range and heft—both categories in which Ras's short sword fell behind.

A Chasseur's typical cruising velocity was on the order of 120 kph. During battle, this could reach higher than 300 kph. Ras stood patiently at the center of the arena, and the distance between him and Nero was shrinking fast. In another thirty seconds or so, the two pilots would clash, and all Nero's allies could do was watch.

"Here I come, Stallion!"

As he roared his foe's nickname, Nero's unit became wreathed in a brilliant scarlet glow. He was drawing upon all the aurons stored in the core to grant himself an explosive burst of speed.

A Chasseur was five to six times the height of an ordinary person, and since its movements mirrored that of the pilot perfectly, it could already run at five times normal human speed. In addition, the *Gent-6* was equipped with auron thrusters that boosted its acceleration even more.

When a Chasseur-size battle-ax was swung at that speed, the movement of its tip could easily surpass the speed of sound, and it would find little difficulty in slicing an opposing unit clean in half.

Equipped with only a ceremonial sword, Ras would have no hope of blocking. Facing Nero's charge head-on was suicide. Thus, his only option was to dodge.

Of course, Nero was fully aware of this, but he was perfectly capable of altering the path of his weapon mid-swing. To dodge the attack completely, Ras would have to wait until the very last moment, and even then, he'd need to muddle Nero's prediction with a feint or bluff.

"Left or right? Which way are you going to run, little man?"

Nero roared his taunts over the intercom while his Chasseur closed in on Ras's like a bullet from a gun.

But Ras didn't move. Not until the moment it seemed the two Chasseurs were about to collide.

"Who said I was going to run?"

"…The fuck?!"

Ras took a step forward. He didn't supercharge his auron emission, nor did he attempt to make a flying leap. All he did was take a single step.

Nero couldn't believe what he was seeing. "*He's insane! Does he want to die?!*" he screamed. But he didn't let Ras's odd behavior throw off his swing. Instead, he poured his whole momentum into it. There was no chance Ras could avoid the blow now.

The rest of the 2nd Division looked on in silent shock. Never in their wildest predictions did they think the battle would be over so quickly.

However, their shock paled in comparison to what came next. Just as the two fighting machines met, Nero's *Gent-6* suddenly rocketed into the sky.

"Wh-what the…?!"

Nero let out a scream from the rapidly cycling seat of his cockpit. His Chasseur was spinning through the air with all the momentum of his nearly supersonic charge intact. Even a silver-rank cavalryman was out of options at this point.

After tracing a beautiful parabolic arc, the *Gent-6* plummeted backfirst into the ground, letting out a booming rumble and throwing up a cloud of dust. Nero had managed to break the fall somewhat, but it wasn't enough.

The Chasseur's arms had twisted and broken off, while the legs were bent at impossible angles. All the armor was stripped away by the impact, revealing snapped muscle fiber drenched in red coolant.

It was only because the Chasseur was in its battle mode, consuming aurons, that the machine came off so lightly. Had it struck the ground in its normal state, the result would be unrecognizable.

"Nero!"

Forgetting he was mid-battle for a moment, Custer called out to his fallen comrade. But all that came back over the radio was the sound of static and creaking metal.

"*Don't worry*," came Ras's voice, unsettlingly calm. *"I went easy on him. He should be able to survive that."*

"What?!"

Custer shivered upon hearing the chilling voice of his opponent. He couldn't think of a single person who could take on a silver-rank cavalryman without at least breaking a sweat.

"*Four left*," said the voice. *"Who's next?"*

Ras pulled Nero's battle-ax from the earth and turned to face his remaining foes. None of the 2nd Division knew the words to describe what they were seeing. Ras was piloting the same model of Chasseur they all were, and yet somehow, there was something different about his. It was as if they weren't just fighting a man in a suit; they were fighting a monster.

Logically, they knew they were just seeing things, but they couldn't shake the part of their mind telling them, *Listen to your instincts. Ras Talion is a threat. One that doesn't follow your rules.*

"*Getting cold feet, are we?*" Ras said. "*In that case, allow me.*"

With that, his unit began emitting a crimson glow. The cavalrymen of the 2nd Division raised their guards, not knowing what was coming. Then Ras swept Nero's battle-ax across the ground, tossing up a veil of dust and sand.

3

Nero's Chasseur flew high into the sky, then crashed into the ground and stopped moving. Kanalayka watched the entire unbelievable sight from her position atop a watchtower.

"What just happened?" she asked aloud. "What did Ras do to him?"

"Nothing," said Izai, holding a pair of binoculars. "That kinetic energy was all the *Gent-6*'s own. All Ras did was subtly alter its direction."

The engineer's response was bafflingly simple. Kanalayka turned to him in shock.

"That…that's incredible! Can that really be done?"

"Not by most people, no, but this is Ras we're talking about."

Izai appeared vaguely amused. Kanalayka, meanwhile, remained pale-faced. It wasn't as if Izai's explanation was difficult to follow. A Chasseur was highly mobile, but that wasn't always a strength. If a unit lost control while in motion, nothing could get it back on track. But to alter a Chasseur's momentum like that required a force

moving at comparable speed. Ras had appeared to be standing still. How had he done it?

Kanalayka thought back to the time Ras broke her sword. His reaction was faster than hers; he was the most highly skilled aura knight in the entire Imperial Guard. Whatever he did back then, it must have been similar to the technique he just used. This unnaturally fast response speed was the key to the *Gent-23*'s impossible feat.

"Is that smoke screen meant to throw off his opponent's coordination?" Kanalayka asked further.

Ras had used the salvaged weapon of the fallen *Gent-6* to kick up a cloud of dust, obscuring visibility on the battlefield. Right now, Kanalayka couldn't make him out at all.

"That's one factor," said Izai. "If the 2nd Division charge now, they might end up striking one another by mistake."

One of the opposing Chasseurs was outfitted as a Caster, capable of launching aura bombardments. Ras's smoke screen prevented that unit from targeting him accurately. It was a standard tactic at times like these.

"But that's not why he did it," said Izai. "That smoke screen is a vital component of Ras's next attack. Take a look."

"…?!"

Kanalayka's eyes shot back to the battlefield, where, in almost no time at all, the *Gent-23* had closed in on the *Gent-7*. The *Gent-7* was equipped with a spear and piloted by Stig Stenius.

It wasn't as though Stig hadn't considered Ras might approach; he just hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. When piloting something as large and heavy as a Chasseur, having good visibility was paramount. Any unnoticed obstacle could tip the unit off-balance, and when moving at top speed, one misstep could be deadly. So when Ras came barreling at him anyway, Stig failed to respond in time. One swing of Ras's stolen battle-ax knocked the *Gent-7* off its feet and launched it backward.

“How?!” cried Kanalayka in disbelief. “With that smoke screen up, Ras should be blind! How did he know where to strike?!”

The *Gent-7* smashed into the ground, sending a thundering boom across the battlefield. A ripple of murmurs coursed through the members of the 2nd Division who were spectating the battle from the watchtower. Each one of them was surely wondering the exact same thing as Kanalayka.

But as she stared into the billowing cloud of dust, the imperial legate realized the answer herself.

“It’s the aurons!” she yelled in epiphany. “He’s using the aurons like a spiderweb! That’s how he knows where all the enemies and the obstacles are!”

“Correct,” said Izai. “Aurons fulfill the same role to a Chasseur that aura does to an aura knight. They’re more than just a power source—they can be used for object detection, too.”

Kanalayka looked out over the battlefield once more. From time to time, she could barely make out a flicker of crimson light. Those were the aurons Ras had spread over the battlefield from his position at its center at the very beginning of the brawl.

Just like how a spider could detect the location of its prey through vibrations, Ras used the minuscule disturbances and echoes in the aurons to calculate his foes’ positions. At this moment, the entire maneuvering ground was his domain.

Knowing that, Kanalayka realized why Ras’s cloud of dust wasn’t going away. Ordinarily, the wind would have dispersed it by then. The fact it was still up could only mean one thing—Ras was using auramancy. An incredibly basic technique that simply altered the path of the wind. By keeping the smoke screen afloat, Ras could conceal the existence of his auron network from the 2nd Division, making his web even more effective.

It wasn’t unusual to use auramancy techniques while piloting a Chasseur. In fact, it was fairly normal. But most people focused on big, flashy techniques like fireballs and cannons to attack from long range. Kanalayka had never seen anything like this—a technique so

precise, so subtle, that Ras's opponents still hadn't noticed it was there.

"Who are you really, Izai?" she asked.

"What do you mean, who? I'm just a simple engineer."

"But I've never seen anyone fight like this, and I bet no one in the 2nd Division has, either. Yet you understood right away. Why?"

Izai looked unsure whether to respond for a moment, but in the end, he smiled.

"Because that's the way we used to fight," he said, looking wistful, "back in Dark Horse."

"Dark Horse… You mentioned that name before. That's the special forces unit you and Ras were both in?"

"That's right. The Special Counter-Behemoth Tactics Devisal Squad. Up until two years ago, it was part of Central Command. Basically, we were meant to develop new ways of fighting the fiends."

"…I didn't know there was any group like that in Central Command," said Kanalayka, surprised. Central Command was the empire's army, so she assumed it was specialized for anti-Chasseur combat. After all, it usually fell to local lords to slay fiends that appeared in their territory, and if a Greater Dragon showed up, well, that would take more than a single squad to defeat anyway.

If humanity actually had a way to fight back against Greater Dragons, they could reclaim the continent and expand civilization dramatically. But the truth was, it just wasn't possible. Feats like that were relegated to the pages of myth and legend.

However, Izai shook his head.

"Princess Fiarca set it up," he explained, a twinge of sadness creeping into his voice. "She gathered researchers and aura knights from across the realm and told them to begin developing techniques —to be used not against Chasseurs but against fiends. A lot of people in Central Command didn't like that, though. They called us a money sink, the princess's toy soldiers, that sort of thing."

Kanalayka was suddenly furious. “That can’t be right! Fighting against fiends is an aura knight’s original purpose!”

Izai’s expression seemed bitter, but his gaze was soft.

“If only all the empire’s soldiers saw it that way,” he said.

After a pause, Kanalayka asked a question. “What happened to that squad?”

“It doesn’t exist anymore. They broke it up after Princess Fiarca died. None of us really cared about promotions and all that, so now I’m the only one who still works here.”

Izai punctuated his words with a cynical shrug. Kanalayka silently nodded along. It stood to reason that a team like Dark Horse, built to chase an impossible dream, would only attract dreamers with no interest in career advancement. Ras was like that, too. Even after achieving that dream, he left his prestige behind without a second thought.

Fiarca had managed to put together a team of people who earnestly cared for the future of mankind. But she was the only one in charge, and when she “died,” it all fell apart. Fiarca had to take on the duties of her twin brother and couldn’t look after her pet project anymore.

“So that’s why Ras was able to slay Kiha Zenri,” murmured Kanalayka. “It’s all thanks to the techniques he learned in Dark Horse.”

Kanalayka finally realized it was no fluke or miracle by which Ras, a no-name knight, slew a Greater Dragon. It was because he was part of the one and only task force in the world trained specifically to defeat them.

“That’s right,” said Izai. “But he got lucky. Two years ago, Ras’s determination outlasted the dragon’s endurance, that’s all. Even with all our techniques, we could never make it a guarantee.”

Izai smiled again, but it failed to make his words sound any less hopeless. Suddenly, he cast a distant look over the battlefield, at Ras’s Chasseur.

"But Ras is different now," he said. "He hasn't only mastered the techniques we devised in Dark Horse—he's refined them into something new. He surely didn't learn that by frequenting the brothels down in Prouss. What's he been doing all this time?"

"…I don't know," said Kanalayka, "but I heard he's been training under Fon Cigel."

"The Black Blade?" said Izai, looking over at Kanalayka in surprise. "Really?"

His shock was understandable. Fon Cigel had been retired for more than twenty years. When the war ended, she faded into obscurity. There were very few people still alive who had even seen her in action. In the minds of most, she was closer to a mythological figure than a real person.

"I'd love to ask you more about that," said Izai, "but it looks like it'll have to wait. Something's happening."

Izai lifted his binoculars to his eyes once more. The cloud of dust was beginning to thin, giving way to the scarlet shimmer that heralded an increase in auron concentration. It wasn't just Ras's unit but the *Gent-5* as well, as its pilot fought for auron dominance in an attempt to interrupt Ras's casting.

"They've noticed his web," said Kanalayka. "I should have known the 2nd Cavalry Division would figure it out sooner or later."

The man piloting the *Gent-5* was Rik Kilka. While only a bronze-rank cavalryman, his observational and analytical skills were second to none.

"You won't be able to hide behind that smoke screen anymore," Kanalayka whispered. "What will you do now, Ras?"

On the edge of her seat, Kanalayka awaited Ras's next move. Izai was pleased to see her enthusiasm.

4

"I was right. He's set up a network."

Excitement crept into Rik's voice. His Chasseur, the *Gent-5*, expelled a stream of crimson particles. At first, it seemed like he was only wasting aurons, but the dramatic effect soon became clear. His technique produced a whirlwind, blowing away the clouds of dust and revealing the *Gent-23* standing there, letting Nero's battle-ax trail along the ground. At the feet of Ras's Chasseur lay the wrecked remains of Stig's unit, the *Gent-7*.

"Ras spread filaments of aurons all across the battlefield. He's using those to detect terrain features and the positions of our units. Everything inside the cloud of dust is like his very own backyard."

"That's why the smoke screen didn't seem to affect him," muttered Custer, grinding his teeth as he gripped the Chasseur's controls.

It was a sneaky, underhanded move, but Custer couldn't call foul. This was a no-holds-barred, five-on-one test match in which Ras was already heavily disfavored. If the 2nd Division failed to steal a win despite those odds, then that was just embarrassing for them. Besides, even if Ras did play fair, they had no guarantee they'd win that fight, either.

While Custer mulled it over, though, the voice of Artos in the *Gent-8* chimed in over the radio.

"We have to change the plan, Custer. Rik and I will try to hold the bastard down. Once we manage it, take us all down at once. Even if he somehow survives that, you've got the layered armor. That should let you last long enough to finish him off."

"Are you sure?"

"We don't have a choice, Custer. I finally know why none of our seniors wanted to face him. The Stallion? Ha! He's more like a monster!"

"…You're right."

Custer heard in Artos's voice a newfound respect for Ras Talion; something he had only learned by facing the man in battle.

The 2nd Division had already lost two out of their five units, while Ras hadn't taken a scratch. Plus, his auron levels were still practically

full. If Custer and his allies hoped to take him down, they would need to start taking drastic measures.

"*The emperor wasn't wrong in making him a Guardian of Silver*," said Rik, driving his Chasseur forward. He and Artos forked off in opposite directions, intending to close in on Ras from both sides. However, he knew his attack was doomed to failure. It was all a distraction so that Custer could get in the clinching blow.

"*But that doesn't mean we're going to go down without a fight*," said Artos, readying the war hammer of his *Gent-8*.

To avoid meeting the same fate as Nero, the pair approached more deliberately. Their intent was to purposefully leave openings in order to invite Ras's aggression, then use the weight of their machines to hold the *Gent-23* still, opening him up to Custer.

Hearing the determined voices of his allies, Custer grew serious.

"Yes," he said. "All we can hope for now is that at least one of us makes it through the fight."

The 2nd Division still outnumbered Ras…for now. If they didn't strike while the iron was hot, their one chance at victory would disappear forever.

"That's the spirit. You with me, Rik?"

"On your mark, Artos. After this, Custer, it's all up to you."

Rik's and Artos's units glowed crimson as both of them unleashed their remaining auron stores, pushing their machines to the limit. With perfect timing, the two Chasseurs closed in on Ras from the front and back. Their spiral formation tightened around him, leaving the *Gent-23* with nowhere to run.

Their aim was not to take Ras down, but to immobilize him for just one second. Given that, there was no need to overreach and invite a counterattack, or even worse, strike the other allied unit by mistake.

All combatants were using the same Chasseur model. Any difference in their performance specifications could be chalked up to a measurement error. That meant that, even if Ras realized what Artos and Rik were planning to do, there was no way he could break

free of it. No matter how skilled a pilot was with their aura, they couldn't push a Chasseur beyond its physical limitations.

When Ras spotted the two units closing in on him, however, he did something unexpected. Tossing his battle-ax aside, he drew once more the rapier he had started the battle with. It seemed he had no intention of escaping the pincer attack, and was planning to take Artos and Rik head-on instead. Ras's unit began spewing aurons, painting the gray frame a bright crimson.

"*Fine by me!*" cried Artos over the comms. He lunged toward Ras, raising his enormous war hammer over the unit's head. However, this attack, with its emphasis on raw power, was merely a feint. Artos's true aim was to draw Ras's attention upward, then deliver a devastating body blow.

"Get him, Artos!" yelled Custer, sensing victory was near. Rik was closing in on the *Gent-23*'s six. Ras had no choice but to slice a path through Artos's oncoming Chasseur. His weapon was fragile and would never hold up to a full-power war hammer strike.

However, the very next moment, Custer's face froze. Ras's rapier glowed crimson, and its blade seemed to more than double in length.

"That's…an Aura Edge?! Impossible!" he choked out.

Aura Edge was one of the Over Arts: a set of extremely difficult auramancy techniques that only a handful could master. Aura Edge was one of the more famous ones, and Custer knew a few people who could perform it—in person, that was. When the technique was scaled up to the level of a Chasseur, the difficulty spiked.

Furthermore, most people could only use Aura Edge to extend the reach of their weapon by a few centimeters—basically by a finger's length. Any range advantage a warrior could get was essential in a fight, after all.

Ras's Aura Edge was roughly three times the original length of his ceremonial blade. It was way beyond any execution of the technique that Custer had ever seen.

When coated in aurons, even a ceremonial sword could slice through a Chasseur like butter. Custer paled as the truth dawned on him.

With a blade of light in its hands, the *Gent-23* stepped forward and delivered an unassuming slash. Before the *Gent-8* could bring its hammer down, Ras's weapon sliced off both its arms, then both its legs. The torso fell helplessly to the ground, and Artos's suicidal charge came to a disappointing end.

Witnessing the defeat of the *Gent-8*, Rik pulled out all the stops and fought without regard for his own safety. His unit, the *Gent-5*, was outfitted for a support role, with four large-caliber aura cannons installed on its back. Rik fired them all at once in a bid to take the *Gent-23* down from behind.

"It's…in your hands now…Custer!"

Artos may have fallen, but he got Ras to turn his back, and that was all that mattered. If Rik's volley struck home, that would give Custer a chance to deal the finishing blow.

However, there was one thing Rik hadn't considered, and that was this—he wasn't the only pilot capable of launching aura.

A sudden chill ran down Custer's spine. "Get away, Rik!" he yelled.

Just then Ras's unit glowed with a pale blue light.

An aura cannon amplified the power of aura while reducing the burden on its caster. However, it wasn't strictly required. In theory, there was no reason why a pilot couldn't perform auramancy without one. For someone with the fine control necessary to create an object-detection network out of aurons, firing off a single technique was a comparatively simple affair.

Even so, Ras's reaction time and casting speed were far faster than either Rik or Custer had predicted. The technique he chose to use was an intermediate-grade one—sixth-level auramancy called Lightning Bolt, which caused countless high-voltage spears of electricity to appear and fly into Rik's unit.

The *Gent-5* was blown back with incredible force, and it fell to the earth with a thud. The force of Ras's technique had been on par with

that of a Caster-class Chasseur.

However, as powerful as it was, that technique gave Custer the opening he needed. Surrounded by the wreckage of his fallen allies, he roared.

"Roooaaaaaaahhh!"

Custer stormed toward Ras, unleashing all his remaining aurons. Ras's gains in this test match were nothing short of miraculous, but Custer's side was not beaten yet. Ras was almost out of aurons following that devastating aura attack. No matter how skilled of a pilot he was, it was pointless if Ras's Chasseur couldn't keep up.

The *Gent-23* was running on fumes, while Custer's *Gent-4* was practically in peak condition. If he attacked now, Custer could win. This was his only chance at victory—the one all his allies had sacrificed themselves for.

"This is the end, Ras Talion!"

Custer's unit moved within striking distance, but the *Gent-23* was slow to react. It was running low on aurons, just as Custer had predicted. With time, those aurons would replenish, but Custer wouldn't give him that chance. He would end it here, in a single blow. He raised his mace, glowing crimson with aurons, in a bid to finish off Ras.

Just then something strange happened. The Aura Edge—Ras's blade of light—suddenly disappeared, and the aurons composing it were sucked back into the unit's frame. With its missing aurons thus replenished, the *Gent-23* became quick and nimble once more. Ras had taken them back into the core in order to avoid a devastating shutdown.

"Is that even possible?!"

Custer had never seen such a thing. Now that the *Gent-23* was fully powered again, his and Ras's units were on even footing, which meant the pilot's skill would decide this fight.

Custer swung his mace with all his might. The strike was the product of all his training—the most perfect attack he'd ever made in his life.

But Ras's counter surpassed it with ease. Custer's mace hit empty air, while Ras swung his blade horizontally at the *Gent-4*.

Ras's blade made such a clean cut, Custer didn't even realize straightaway that he'd been hit. He only noticed it when his view began to pitch, and the entire Chasseur collapsed to the ground.

As the shock rattled his bones, Custer's mind was clear. All he could think about was Ras's final attack. No tricks, pure skill, yet it far exceeded anything he or his allies could pull off.

It was a magnificent loss for the 2nd Division. Within the ruins of his shattered cockpit, a smile formed on Custer's lips.

"Ras Talion Veredica," he said, "I underestimated you."

Only one unit remained standing: Ras's *Gent-23*.

But for some reason, he didn't stand down.

He stood at the arena's center, still on guard, as a large shadow passed overhead.

And then a strange rumbling cry, like that of a monstrous bird, shook the battlefield.

5

An odd figure cut across the sky, leaving a white trail in its wake. It was colored bronze and was about the size of a wyvern.

But it wasn't a wyvern. Ras recognized its metal plating, like armor, and the crimson glow of aurons that coated its wings. Hanging below the midsection was a mechanical humanoid with an enormous sword.

The flying object was a Caladrius, a special kind of Chasseur designed to transport other Chasseurs via air travel.

"A custom model," Ras acknowledged, observing the aircraft's cargo. "Not exactly strange for an officer of Central Command."

Ras quickly reasoned it was no coincidence that a new Chasseur appeared just as his engagement with the 2nd Division ended. It was almost like it had been waiting, and Ras had no doubt he was its target.

In general, the machines known as Chasseurs fell into two broad categories. The first was the standard-issue models, which were built en masse using a factory and an assembly line, while the second was the custom models, created long ago and passed down as family heirlooms. Many people, especially among the noble class, only considered the latter to be "real" Chasseurs, while the mass-produced types were merely their inferior copies.

What everyone agreed on, however, was that there was a marked difference in performance between the two types. It wasn't just about whether the Chasseurs could withstand the rigors of flight; the auron-production rate of a custom-made Chasseur far exceeded that of the standard-issue models, and custom-made Chasseurs often boasted unique weaponry as well.

The kill rate for a custom model tended to hover around ten times that of its assembly-line counterparts; sometimes even more. It often took an entire squadron of standard-issue Chasseurs just to take down a single custom one.

All of a sudden, a familiar voice came over the comms link.

"Apologies for the rude entrance, Mr. Talion. I hope you don't mind if I drop in."

The Caladrius dived sharply, at such speed it seemed likely to crash-land, and the Chasseur beneath disengaged from it. As the unit left its restraints, Ras got a good look at the frame for the first time.

It was a heavy-armor unit, with thick plating, and the shoulder bore the markings of Central Command. While it was considerably larger than the *Gent*, there was no doubt the unit belonged to the 2nd Division.

With one last burst of crimson particles, the bronze-plated Chasseur touched down. It gouged out a channel in the earth before coming to a halt, completely stable, and turning to face Ras.

Ras sighed. "Hunlahan," he said. Although he couldn't see the man's face, the major general's boisterous voice was unmistakable.

Over on the watchtower platform, the spectating soldiers from the 2nd Division all shared a baffled look. It seemed none of them were expecting their commanding officer to make an appearance, either.

"*The very same. And this is the* Ahajia*, the Chasseur of my ancestors.*"

"*Ahajia* the Impregnable?" queried Ras, raising an eyebrow, intrigued. "I didn't know you hailed from Gulin, Major General."

Of all the Hunlahans in the empire, perhaps the most famous was Count Hunlahan of the Gulin Peninsula. The Gulin Peninsula was situated at the southern tip of the continent and saw frequent raids and incursions by the navies of foreign nations across the ocean. The aura knights of the Hunlahan house were tasked with fending off these threats.

During the Third South Sea War, forty years ago, the house of Hunlahan was said to have defended the peninsula for three days and three nights until reinforcements arrived, holding strong against an army of seventy Chasseurs with a force of only fourteen. The *Ahajia* was a symbol of the Hunlahan house and a reminder of that great achievement.

"*You know of it? You do me a great honor, Mr. Talion*," said Hunlahan, impressed. Meanwhile, his Chasseur unhooked the greatsword from its back and prepared for battle. Its blade was over ten meters long, and it required two hands to wield. It was a so-called Magic Blade, with a device installed in the hilt that amplified the power of the wielder's aura. The money required to manufacture Hunlahan's sword alone could purchase three whole units of the *Gent* model that Ras was piloting. Equipping it put the *Ahajia* in a class of its own.

"Does this mean you're not ready to throw in the towel just yet, Major General?" asked Ras, keeping up his guard. He had already had to fight five-on-one odds, and he wouldn't have been surprised if the 2nd Division added a sixth on top of that.

"Perish the thought, Mr. Talion. You won this test match fair and square. My men have learned a valuable lesson from you, and I just

thought we might commemorate the occasion with a duel. One-on-one, even footing. What do you say?"

"Even footing? You're in a custom model, and I'm riding a *Gent*."

"Well, you're a Guardian of Silver now, Mr. Talion. A lowly major general has to balance the scales somehow."

"Any excuse, eh?" Ras scoffed. Hunlahan couldn't have been completely oblivious to his own bluster, but he smoothed over the awkward moment with a hearty smile.

"*I won't force you to accept*," he said, "*and I admit, the deck is stacked against you. But you've shown your mettle already, Mr. Talion, and I won't hear a single bad word against a brave chap who showed some gumption when the cards were down.*"

"That's very gracious of you," Ras replied. It was true; his victory against the 2nd Division had already secured Ras's reputation. If anything, he had overdone it and probably made a few enemies in the process.

If Hunlahan beat him in a duel now, it was unlikely Ras's reputation would suffer. Everyone knew custom Chasseurs were a league ahead of their standard-issue brethren. Winning a duel in one was hardly impressive, just expected.

Most likely, it was simply a way for Hunlahan and the 2nd Division to save face. To act like they'd given it a decent shot and that points had been scored on both sides. The fact he'd brought a custom model to the fight was a gaffe, to be sure, but one that could be pinned on Hunluhan's own boisterous nature and not brought against his men.

"But are you sure you've thought this through, Major General?" asked Ras, a touch of concern in his voice. "If you lose this fight, it'll make for quite the story back at Central Command."

Hunlahan fell silent for a few moments. When he realized his opponent was being dead serious, he erupted into loud laughter.

"Am I to take that as a sign of your acceptance, then?"

"Sure, why not. I'm the one with nothing to lose. I hope you'll give me a sporting chance, Major General."

Ras's unit drew its sword. That was all the answer Hunlahan needed.

"Very good."

His unit, the *Ahajia*, raised its greatsword high, and the blade appeared to burst into flames. With the crimson aurons billowing like fire, the bronze-plated Chasseur let out a ferocious howl.

◇◇◇◇

"He's bringing a custom into a duel against a standard-issue Chasseur?!"

Up in the watchtower, Kanalayka shook her head and stared, like she couldn't believe her eyes. Hunlahan's bronze-plated unit had just taken its first swing against Ras's *Gent*.

The *Ahajia* boasted what looked like a quad-core auron engine. The *Gent* was a single-core model, which meant Hunlahan was producing aurons at least four times faster than Ras. Particle-production rate had a direct effect on a Chasseur's strength. With Ras's ceremonial sword, he had no chance of even attempting to block Hunlahan's swing, and he could only take evasive action. It was like an adult fighting against a child.

"What are those two thinking?! Ras has only just finished fighting the 2nd Division!"

"Maybe so, but Ras can still win this," came Izai's calm deduction. "He chose the right unit."

"What do you mean, the right unit?"

"The *Gent-23* was once piloted by a gold-rank cavalryman. It's never been seriously damaged, and the parts have grown in sync with each other. Even after that battle, it's only operating a hair below peak performance. Ras's techniques may look flashy, but they're shockingly efficient. He hasn't taxed the unit any more than he's needed to."

"But how did Ras know that? He'd never seen those *Gent*s before."

Puzzled, Kanalayka thought back to when Ras first entered the 2nd Division's hangar. After browsing rows of identical units, he'd settled on the *Gent-23*. There was no way he could have known the Chasseurs' individual quirks.

"Ras is sensitive to that kind of thing; he always has been. He said it's like he can hear their voices."

"Their voices?"

"Enough about that," said Izai, looking back out over the battlefield. "The real problem here is the major general's unit. The *Ahajia* is a bad matchup for Ras's skills."

Out on the maneuvering grounds, Ras's Chasseur was performing magnificently, despite the wide difference in combat potential. He was dodging the major general's sword swings, and he was even managing to fire off a few aura attacks in return.

However, none of those techniques made a dent in the *Ahajia*'s armor plating. The whole unit was shrouded in a crimson glow that nullified any low-level aura attacks on impact. To make matters worse, Ras was only armed with his ceremonial rapier. If he attacked with it, there was a very real chance the weapon would not survive.

"What's he doing?!"

Kanalayka's eyes flew wide. Ras's sword was suddenly enveloped in a fire-like glow, and its range extended. He was calling upon the Aura Edge once more. No doubt Ras had also realized the ceramic blade would not withstand a single blow in its natural state.

Seizing the brief opening after Hunlahan's attack ended, Ras thrust with his energized rapier. Despite the *Ahajia* calling upon its overwhelming horsepower to evade, Ras's attack was too swift. He drove his auron blade at the unit's shoulder, where the armor plating was the thinnest. Just as the attack was about to connect, an invisible barrier deflected the blow, throwing off a cascade of crimson sparks.

"I'd heard the rumors, but I'd never seen it in action…," said Kanalayka.

"Yes. That's the *Ahajia*'s unique armament, the Bergfried," Izai explained. "An invisible wall conjured and maintained automatically by the Chasseur itself. That unbreakable defense is why they call it the Impregnable."

As a Tuner of Central Command, Izai was more than familiar with the major general's Chasseur to elucidate its abilities. As a result, no one understood the danger Ras faced better than him.

The only way Ras could hope to defeat an opponent like Hunlahan was to catch the unit off guard or attack from behind. But the *Ahajia*'s Bergfried made that impossible.

"That barrier activates automatically," lamented Kanalayka, "and even an Aura Edge can't pierce it!"

"Unfortunately, that's as far as a humble *Gent* can go. Even at full power, it can't hope to break the barrier. The defense was developed to stand up to attacks from another custom model, after all."

"That's not fair…"

Kanalayka unconsciously nibbled her lip. Izai watched her in mild amusement. Just a few days ago, she had been the top knight in the Imperial Guard, and here she was looking out for Ras, a complete newcomer. Watching the pretty, straitlaced legate show a softer side, Izai couldn't help but imagine the palace gossips would have much to say if they could see it, too.

Izai, meanwhile, was not really concerned with such things. The more pressing issue on his mind was the Chasseur battle unfolding before him.

"Ras recognized the major general's unit," he said, "and he knew about its nickname. That must mean he knows what the Bergfried is capable of."

Running a hand through his disheveled hair, Izai looked out across the arena and smiled.

"There must be a reason he decided to take on the *Ahajia* regardless. Why don't you show us what that is, Ras?"

The young Tuner's words were inaudible over the din of clashing metal titans. By his side, Kanalayka clasped her hands in desperate

prayer.

6

Two hulking giants of steel leaped across the battlefield as quick as the wind, like birds of prey locked in mortal struggle. Two titans struggled for supremacy, while flashes of crimson illuminated the wasteland like flowers.

"*Good show, Mr. Talion!*" Hunlahan loudly declared. "*Why, it's like you're not in a* Gent *at all!*"

The power output of Ras's Chasseur was not even a third of the *Ahajia*'s. Even just keeping up with the major general's movements was an impressive feat.

"*However*," he said, "*it would reflect poorly on me if I struggled much longer. I suppose it's time we brought this battle to a close.*"

"Right you are, Major General. I think I've finally figured it out."

"Figured what out, pray tell?"

All of a sudden, Hunlahan's unit rocketed toward Ras's at twice its usual speed. For any other unit, this would be a suicidal charge, but the Bergfried rendered the *Ahajia*'s advance unstoppable.

However, just then Hunlahan spotted an attack coming from an angle he didn't expect. It was aimed directly at the unit's head, imperceptible until it was nearly too late. Right at the very last second, the Bergfried activated, deflecting the crimson blade.

"A second sword?! So this is the trick you've been hiding up your sleeve, Mr. Talion!"

The sword was none other than the left hand of Ras's *Gent*. From its outstretched fingers rose a blade of crimson light. Ras had used the Aura Edge, and the base was not a ceramic blade but the metal body of the Chasseur.

If the Bergfried had not activated, that single slash would have ended the duel. Nobody understood that better than Hunlahan.

"Very impressive…but tough luck, Mr. Talion. I shan't be falling for the same trick twice."

Hunlahan swung his two-handed sword, which Ras narrowly avoided.

Logically, striking with two Aura Edges instead of one doubled the base power, but even that wasn't enough to breach the *Ahajia*'s defenses. Ras, on the other hand, was rapidly losing aurons due to having to keep two blades active. The performance of his unit was plummeting, and he could no longer move fast enough to do anything but defend.

"That's all right," said Ras. "I already learned everything I needed to."

"What do you mean?"

"The Bergfried's protection is made up of four shields," he calmly stated. "Each shield is only large enough to cover a small portion of the Chasseur. Those shields move to block incoming attacks automatically, making it seem as if there's one cohesive barrier enshrouding the whole unit, when there isn't."

"And what makes you think that?"

"Because it didn't block the low-level aura attacks I fired. I'm assuming that's because whatever system is in control of moving the shields determined those techniques weren't a threat. But if the Bergfried really was impregnable, it wouldn't let any attacks through at all."

Ras had been disguising his auramancy techniques as distractions, fired in desperation, when in fact they were anything but. All the time, he had been testing—how strong of an attack caused the Bergfried to react? How many shots could it respond to at once?

"The fact of the matter is, it *can't* block everything. Only four attacks at once. Any more than that, and it has to let something through. Isn't that right, Major General?"

"*Hmph. I've never really thought about it, but I suppose you're right*," replied Hunlahan in genuine admiration. *"Still, how do you intend to take advantage of that? You're close to shutdown already, and you need to come up with five attacks at the same time."*

"That I do. So would you mind doing me a favor and giving up now?"

Hunlahan froze for a moment. *"Giving up? You expect me to throw in the towel here?"*

"I know I may not act like it, but I do work for the empire now," Ras said. "I'd hate to be responsible for damaging one of Central Command's most treasured Chasseurs. They aren't as easy to fix as the *Gent*s, after all."

"Is that so, now?" The line fell briefly silent, and then… *"Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"*

Howling laughter, esteem mixed with incredulity, echoed through the comms link.

"You truly are a gentlemanly sort, Mr. Talion! But don't worry; the Ahajia *has been with Central Command for many years, and our engineers are more than capable of putting all its parts back in the right place! If it's a show you've got planned for us, then give us a show!"*

"I'll hold you to that, Major General."

"Splendid! Let's make this a battle to remember, Mr. Talion!"

Aurons began flooding out of Hunlahan's bronze-plated Chasseur, the crimson light shimmering like a mirage. The next second, his two-handed sword started to glow.

"An Aura Edge!"

"*Ha-ha-ha! I'm afraid it's not quite as impressive as yours!*" Hunlahan admitted. The particle-amplification device installed in his blade, plus the *Ahajia*'s four-core engine, simplified the feat considerably. Yet a decent level of auramancy skill was still required to keep the blade edge stable. Without it, the particles would instantly disperse.

"There's no need to be humble, Major General. In fact, I should thank you. Now that you've given me a reason to go all out, Fon can't complain if I use this technique."

"Fon? You mean Fon Cigel? The Black Blade?"

A slight tremor entered Hunlahan's voice. There wasn't an aura knight in all the land who didn't recognize the name—the name of one of the four most powerful swordsmen and -women on the continent. Hunlahan had never even suspected that Ras had trained at her hand until now.

The *Gent-23* lowered its sword. Both of Ras's Aura Edges dissolved, and the particles making up those blades of light disappeared back inside the machine's core. It was the same technique Ras had used in his battle against Custer, only with two crucial differences.

The first was that this time, Ras had no need to recover his particles. In the time he spent talking to Hunlahan, his unit's auron levels had already returned to full capacity.

The second was that Ras had dispersed *two* Aura Edges.

The amount of aurons stored in both blades of light, combined with the brimming auron batteries of Ras's Chasseur, created an instantaneous concentration of particles far beyond what a single *Gent* could contain.

Ras called upon this dense concentration to unleash his next Over Art. The crimson shroud of his Chasseur flickered as a new technique was born.

A set of boomerang-shaped Aura Edges appeared at the *Gent*'s back, making the Chasseur resemble a six-winged angel. These wings were made of aura, and they were sharp enough to cut through steel.

"The Black Arts of Fon Cigel!!"

"This one's called Seraphic Blade. Let's see how impregnable that Chasseur really is, Major General."

All six wings closed simultaneously around Hunlahan's unit. With no hope of dodging an attack from six different angles, Hunlahan braced for impact.

"Raaaaaahhh!"

The air around the *Ahajia* appeared to burst alight. A shower of aurons cascaded outward as four of Ras's blades met with the four

invisible shields of the Bergfried.

Meanwhile, Hunlahan caught the last two on his greatsword. The Black Blade's techniques might have been mighty, but there was no way they could contest the overwhelming superiority of a custom unit. With a sweep of his energized blade, he shattered the two light beams to dust.

To everyone watching, it seemed like Hunlahan had weathered the devastating attack unscathed.

Perhaps the major general thought so, too.

That was his fatal mistake.

Ras sighed. "You really made me work for this one."

Igniting the *Gent*'s thrusters, Ras flew into close range. His unit's auron stores were almost depleted, but he had enough power remaining for one more blow. Hunlahan, meanwhile, couldn't get his machine to respond at all.

"Wh-what?!"

He had just deployed four impenetrable barriers while swinging an auron-sheathed greatsword. Even a quad-core engine couldn't handle that kind of immediate power drain. As a result, his machine had entered shutdown. In that state, even a custom model like the *Ahajia* became nothing more than a sitting duck.

"Marvelous… Mr. Talion, you've done it!"

As he sensed his imminent defeat, a satisfied smile appeared on the major general's lips. The next moment, Ras's ceremonial sword pierced the torso of the bronze-plated Chasseur.

CHAPTER 5 The Stallion Knight Encounters a Legendary Chasseur

1

Not everyone in the army reacted favorably to Ras's victory. Some resented him even more; others looked at him as if he were a monster. While the Stallion had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was fit to lead the Imperial Guard, his complete whitewash of the 2nd Division had heaped shame upon Central Command.

Fortunately, these disparaging voices were considerably fewer than Ras expected. Most soldiers were fascinated by the esoteric techniques Ras had used in his test match, and they spoke very highly of him. The reason for this, of course, was Ras's victory over Hunlahan. Anyone who wanted to speak ill of Ras after that was indirectly insulting the major general's prowess.

The maintenance crews, however, were less pleased. All in all, Ras had trashed six units, including a custom model, which were a real headache to repair.

Meanwhile, from Ras's point of view, everything had worked out perfectly. He didn't even have anything to feel guilty about, because he had been the aggrieved party in this scenario.

After settling the aftermath and returning to the palace, Ras let out a deflated sigh.

"What a slog this day's been."

Kanalayka looked over at him and smiled.

"That's all you'd call it? You're a fearsome man, Ras."

"I ought to be getting paid for jobs like this, you know. At least the army should stay off my back for a while."

"I should hope so. Nobody can say you aren't fit for your position now. And they'd have to be mad to challenge you again after seeing what you did to Major General Hunlahan."

"I'm just lucky he decided to show up," said Ras, shaking his head wearily.

The two of them walked through the large, open hallways of the palace. Hunlahan was a respected officer, and the *Ahajia* a formidable Chasseur. There wasn't a single man in the whole army who didn't recognize that. The fact Ras had defeated them both was sure to discourage any naysayers from contesting his position for a while.

A court official passed the pair in the opposite direction. After seeing the look on his face, Ras leaned toward Kanalayka.

"Is it just me," he said, "or are people back here giving me the stink eye, too?"

"They've probably heard all about your victory already," Kanalayka replied. "There's a lot of information traffic between the maneuvering grounds and the palace."

"That doesn't explain why they all suddenly hate my guts, though."

"You're right, that is a little strange. The people here shouldn't have any particular reason to be on the 2nd Division's side."

Kanalayka placed her hand to her chin. Ras gave a carefree shrug. They didn't look angry enough to try anything, so Ras figured he could forget about it. Just then he reached the Imperial Guard's barracks, where an unexpected figure waited for him.

"Hello, Ras. Welcome back. And you too, Kanalayka."

"Your Highness?" exclaimed Kanalayka, stopping in her tracks. "What are you doing here?"

Princess Fiarca was sitting in a chair in the waiting room, wearing a satisfied smile beneath her mask.

"Am I not allowed to be here?" she asked coyly. "I may not act like it, but I am technically a legate, too, you know."

"R-right you are, ma'am…"

"As if I'd ever come here for business, though," she admitted. "I'm here to give my thanks to Ras. You kept your promise, just like you said."

"His promise?"

"Yes. You said you'd make a new name for yourself, and that's just what you've done."

Fiarca seemed even more cheerful than usual. Ras stared at her judgmentally for a second, then sighed.

"You placed a bet on me, didn't you?" he said.

"Sh-she did…?" asked Kanalayka, looking over at him.

Fiarca gave her best nonchalant whistle, while Elmira, standing by her side, chimed in.

"The palace officials were taking wagers on the result of Sir Talion's match," she said. "The question was how many opposing units he could eliminate before defeat. Her Highness placed a bet for *six*."

"And thanks to you, I won the whole pot," Fiarca admitted without a hint of shame. "Perhaps I should pick up some lovely tea for the office. The budget cuts around here lately have been *horrendous*."

Ras nodded to himself. Only Princess Fiarca would ever predict a 6–0 score for a 5v1 match.

"But how did you know Major General Hunlahan would compete?" asked Kanalayka, mystified.

"I didn't," replied Fiarca. "But I predicted Ras would wipe the floor with his opponents, and the Hunlahan I know would never take that lying down. If he won, he could claim the whole thing as a draw, and there'd be no hard feelings; whereas if he lost, it would only serve to prove Ras's worthiness even further. From my point of view, it was a win-win, and it's all thanks to Hunlahan."

"If that's what you think," said Ras, "then consider sending some of your winnings his way. I tried to limit the damage, but custom repairs don't come cheap."

Most, if not all, custom models were built to arcane and nonstandard specifications. You couldn't take them to any old repair shop and expect the workers there to know what to do with it. It took specialized expertise and, of course, a lot of money to get the job done. Far more than even a major general's salary could support.

"Perhaps I'll do just that," said Fiarca. "He can consider it an apology for having you thrash them so soundly."

As the princess nodded to herself, Elmira suddenly frowned. Raised voices were coming from the hallway outside. It sounded like someone was having an argument with the imperial guards protecting the door. Normally, the guards would remove any intruder without delay, so the fact the dispute was still ongoing must have meant that whoever was at the door was someone the guards didn't know how to handle.

"What's all this about?" Kanalayka asked, heading over with a hand on her sword. "Did something happen?"

The palace guards by the door hurriedly straightened.

"Apologies, ma'am," said one. "It seems a priestess has arrived. She wishes to speak with Sir Talion, ma'am."

"With Ras? Why?"

Kanalayka glanced back at the man in question. Priestess was a title given by the Argyll Empire to any female auramancer capable of performing healing auramancy. Even the imperial palace only boasted three of them. That was to say they were figures of some import, and Kanalayka could only guess what urgent business could possibly have brought this one over at such short notice.

"You don't have to worry on my account," said Fiarca to the doorman. "Let her in."

A priestess was equal in rank to a count. It would not be a breach of conduct for one to meet with the princess.

"Your Highness, are you sure?" asked Kanalayka, shooting Fiarca a serious look. The last thing she wanted was for a fight to break out in the princess's presence.

"It's all right," Fiarca answered. "I must say, I'm a little curious myself to see what this woman wants."

"As you wish."

Sighing inwardly at the princess's complete lack of self-preservation, Kanalayka commanded the guards to show the guest in. The guards seemed highly relieved to not have to worry about it anymore, and they opened the doors to the waiting room.

In walked a petite woman whom Ras had never seen. She looked around his age, with a refined air betrayed by babyish features that made her seem rather more childish than she was. She was wearing the priestess uniform, a pure-white robe that resembled a nun's habit.

"Your Highness? I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed upon entering. It seemed she hadn't expected to find Crown Prince Auriol milling about the imperial barracks.

Still in her disguise, Fiarca returned a friendly wave.

"Good to see you again, Lisa," she said. "Thank you for all you do for my father."

"Your thanks are wasted on me, Your Highness," the woman replied, bowing courteously. "Would that I were more skilled in the healing arts, so that I could do more for him."

The emperor's waning health was an open secret around the palace. Naturally, the priestesses were tasked with treating him, so it followed that Fiarca knew her name and face.

"I heard you wanted to see Ras."

"Yes, Your Highness. I heard that Sir Talion requested my companionship, so I came right over to make myself available."

Ras nearly choked. Not a second after getting over her initial shock, the priestess let slip an unbelievably outrageous remark. Fiarca immediately glared daggers in Ras's direction.

"What does she mean by that, Ras?"

"I'm afraid I haven't the faintest idea. Do you think you could tell me more, Miss…Lisa, was it?"

Despite all his dealings with the opposite sex, Ras was quite sure he'd never seen this woman before. The priestess tipped her head in confusion.

"Am I mistaken? I was told by my brother that Sir Talion engaged the 2nd Division on my behalf…"

"Your brother?" asked Ras. "Apologies, my lady, but might I ask whom you mean?"

"He's a bronze-rank cavalryman, Sir Talion. Lieutenant Custer Farrell of the 2nd Cavalry Division."

"You mean…you're Custer's sister?"

"That's right. Lisa Farrell, at your service."

Lisa smiled sweetly. Ras, on the other hand, was sweating bullets. It was all coming back now. He'd told the lieutenant to introduce him to his sister should he win the test match, but he didn't mean it; it was only meant to stir him up a little. Ras hadn't even known the man *had* a sister, let alone that she was a priestess. And he certainly hadn't expected the woman to just show up on his doorstep, good as gold.

Kanalayka stood similarly shocked, having just realized the mix-up herself. Suddenly, a loud voice cut through the awkward silence.

"Lisa!"

Before the guards could stop them, three men dressed in Central Command uniforms forced their way into the chamber. At the front of the group, Lieutenant Custer Farrell staggered up to Ras and fell to his knees.

"Please forgive me, Sir Talion!"

He pressed his forehead into the carpet, so that for all his impressive physique, the man looked very small indeed. Ras, Kanalayka, and even the two men with Custer all looked at him, aghast.

"Er…what's this about?" Ras asked one of Custer's friends.

"A-apologies, Sir Talion. It…er…it sounds like Lady Farrell heard tell of her brother's wager, and before he could stop her…"

"Come on, Custer. Stand up, please…"

Ras nodded to the two cavalrymen, who tried to lift Custer to his feet but to no avail. It didn't seem like the man wanted to lift his head.

"I will do whatever it takes to repay my disrespect, Sir Talion. I was a fool for not recognizing your greatness sooner, I know that now! But please, I beg you! Not my sister! Anything but her!"

"Yeah, I know. I forgive you. Just stand up already."

Ras couldn't care less what the cavalryman thought of him, so long as it didn't affect him. On the contrary, all this fuss was beginning to get on his nerves.

It was then that Lisa spoke, in the strict yet gentle tone of an older sister.

"Please stand up, Custer. You're bothering all these nice people."

"But, Lisa…!"

"Remember, Custer, a man of the Farrell house never goes back on his word. As your big sister, it is my duty to pick you up whenever you fall."

"But if you should pay the price for my mistake…!"

"Then that, too, is my duty, and I shall carry it out with pride. Even should the rumors about Sir Talion prove true, I will bear and raise his children with love and piety."

"Lisa…"

With teary eyes, Custer looked up at his sister, who returned only an angelic smile. Ras heard Princess Fiarca behind him trying hard not to laugh. It seemed her keen mind had already pieced the entire thing together.

Meanwhile, Ras's face was still frozen in a bewildered grimace. Surely the priestess didn't believe all those absurd rumors about women becoming pregnant just by touching him?

"Excuse me, my lady," he said. "That's very admirable of you, but I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding."

"Has there?"

"Yes. You don't need to offer yourself to me. And you, Custer; I'm not going to take your sister, so don't worry."

"You're…you're not…?"

The fear in Custer's eyes vanished, replaced in an instant with childlike joy.

"Thank you greatly, Sir Talion! Now I can receive your tutelage with peace in my heart!"

"My tutelage? What do you mean by that?"

The sudden mention of mentorship threw Ras for a loop.

"You told me I wasn't fit to be an aura knight, do you recall?"

"Right. That," said Ras, wincing a little. It wasn't something he really wanted to talk about in front of other people, as he could end up touching on some rather sensitive personal information. "To be precise, what I was saying is you're not suited to auramancy swordsmanship. Your aura is too dense."

"Too…dense, you say?"

"Compared to an aura knight, your body stores aura at a higher concentration than usual," Ras explained. "That makes it slower to react and harder to control. Have you ever felt like that?"

Custer fell silent; somehow, he looked like a wet rat. In the test match, it was Custer who was trusted with delivering the final blow. That was because his offensive power was the greatest when compared to his peers. Perhaps he was aware on some level his mobility was lacking, and knew he wouldn't be able to match Ras's speed.

"It's not necessarily a bad thing," Ras said. "Storing aura more densely means your total capacity is higher, which gives you access to more powerful techniques. If you learn some Over Arts, that should give you a major advantage in a fight."

"Me? Learn some Over Arts?"

Custer's face lit up, and he scrambled forward, clutching at the hem of Ras's trousers.

"Please, Sir Talion, teach me! I beg of you! You told me yesterday that you knew a good teacher, did you not?!"

"Oh? Did you really say that, Ras?" asked Fiarca, a teasing smile on her lips. Ras slapped his temple and groaned. He regretted

saying it now.

"Yeah," he answered. "There's a girl called Amalie who works at Fon's brothel. She's a great auramancer, even better than Fon. She's a bit of an…odd one, though."

"A prostitute? I would much rather have you, Sir Talion."

"I'd really appreciate it if you could phrase that a little differently, Lieutenant Farrell…"

Ras curled his lips at Custer's easily misinterpretable remark.

"Please call me Custer, Master Talion."

"I told you, I don't want to be your master."

Fiarca chuckled cheerfully. "Why not, Ras? You're both soldiers of the empire now. Help a fellow out."

Even if she was half joking, the princess's words were difficult to dismiss. For a moment, Ras pondered how to proceed, and Custer's two friends—Artos Calio and Rik Kilka—spoke up.

"E-excuse me, Sir Talion! If you're going to train Farrell, then train me, too! I fell in love with your combat style while watching you fight Major General Hunlahan!"

"Me too, sir! Why, that object-detection technique you used could be a great boon for Central Command! We'd never have to fear inclement weather or poor visibility ever again!"

The two of them fell to their knees and groveled alongside Custer. One of Ras's eyes began to twitch.

"Isn't it nice to have people look up to you, Ras?" said Kanalayka, blissfully ignorant of Ras's despair. She seemed genuinely pleased that Ras's opponents in the test match had learned to respect him. Lisa looked similarly content.

The priestess and soldiers departed—the three men seemingly under the impression that Ras was going to train them—while the man himself collapsed against the wall, exhausted. He peered out the palace window in a vain attempt to cast his mind anywhere but here.

"Well, I don't think we need to worry whether people respect your position anymore, do we?" remarked Fiarca. Then, all of a sudden,

she stood up. “Elmira, look after things around here, will you? Ras, you’re coming with me.”

Ras raised a dubious eyebrow.

“Really? Where to?”

“To the mausoleum,” Fiarca replied. “You’re allowed in there now.”

For a second, her usual cheeky smile was nowhere to be seen. Then a mischievous glint appeared in her eye, and a lonely voice escaped her lips.

“It’s underneath the palace, where my ancestors are buried,” she explained. “Aur is resting there with them.”

2

In a corner of the vast palace gardens stood a tall building: the Telosian Cathedral of Prata. It was here where the emperors of Argyll were laid to rest.

The building itself was not any grander or finer than the other cathedrals in Vif Arger, yet perhaps that was to be expected; apart from those who worked at the imperial palace, not a soul was allowed inside. Calling it a monument of cultural heritage was putting it nicely; in truth, it was nothing but a beaten, weathered old relic.

However, the building’s true value lay not in the vaulted halls of the cathedral itself, but rather in what rested beneath it. For here were laid emperors, empresses, all the great figures stretching back over eight hundred years to the empire’s foundation.

“It’s a strange feeling, looking at a grave with your own name on it.”

Staring at a stone slab sitting in a newly excavated cavity in the wall, Princess Fiarca gave a self-aware smirk. It was close to midnight, and in the twisting passageways of the imperial catacombs, she and Ras were the only living souls around. With no light sources so deep underground, Fiarca had used her auramancy to conjure a floating sphere of light.

Its white glow illuminated the words FIARCA JEVA ARGENTEIA, which were engraved into the stone. It was the final resting place of the imperial princess, who had lost her life two years earlier.

Of course, the princess was alive and well by Ras's side, so the one inside the tomb was Fiarca's twin brother, Crown Prince Auriol, the man who had died in her place.

"It's rather grandiose, isn't it?" said Ras with a sigh. "Almost like the tombs the emperors get."

It hadn't escaped his notice that the stone with Fiarca's name on it was considerably grander than the others nearby. Not just in size but in ornamentation, too. Almost as though Fiarca herself had had something to do with it.

"It's because the people of this nation loved Princess Fiarca," she said without a shred of humility. "And that was *before* she sacrificed herself to keep the world safe, don't forget."

Ras scoffed, "I suppose so," causing Fiarca to glare at him.

"You sound like you want to condemn me for stealing the glory of my brother's deeds," she said.

"Hardly. Fame means jack when you're dead. I'm sure Aur thought that, too."

"I suppose you're right," Fiarca replied. "But I don't think he was wrong to do what he did. Aur was seriously wounded, and even if he returned home, it might have been years before he fully recovered."

"An ailing emperor and an infirm prince… I see what you mean," said Ras with a sour expression.

The Argyll Empire had lost many of its heirs to a bloody war of succession. That was one of the major contributing factors to the civil unrest currently brewing. Because of that, when the emperor fell ill, Auriol was forced to take over his father's duties. He was put in charge of commanding the army, and consequently suffered a grave wound in battle.

"What do you think would happen," asked Fiarca, "if the empire in that state lost its princess, too?"

"The Council of Seven would have no better chance to act," Ras replied. "They'd move to seize the throne as soon as they could. They'd produce their own pretenders, fabricate their claims, and worst case, it could lead to civil war."

"Exactly. So it's only because Aur had the courage to die in my place that this nation is at peace. I don't like to think of it that way, but it's true."

"He doesn't deserve all the credit. You're the one who assumed his identity and carried out the emperor's duties in his place."

"I wonder about that," said Fiarca with an uncomfortable smile. "Sometimes I think that was all part of Aur's plan as well. Like he knew what I was going to do before I did."

When Auriol chose to lure the enemy armies into the dragon's den, he did so using his sister's Chasseur. He knew Fiarca would take over his position after he died.

And in fact, she did just that. Auriol was right all along. Even if it was the right thing to do, even if it was necessary, Fiarca didn't like the feeling of dancing in her brother's palm. She admired him well enough, and the two were close siblings, but Fiarca couldn't remember a time she'd seen Auriol at a genuine loss, despite Fiarca herself being the troublemaker of the family.

"He'd always been like that, even at the academy," said Ras, chuckling. "I remember it well."

Auriol Ref Argenteia was a difficult man to sum up in just one word. His angelic good looks aside, he never seemed particularly remarkable. He was poorer with the blade than Ras, and less skilled at auramancy than his sister, Fiarca. His academic performance was commendable but never at the top of the class.

Yet despite all this, whenever he competed with his fellow students, Auriol always came out on top, whether that was on the proving grounds or when selling hotcakes at the school festival. He would build a strong team of specialized individuals, and his strategies were so perfect it was like he could see the future. Before

anyone could figure him out, Auriol had run his competition into the dust.

And while his morals were irreproachable, Auriol had a real love for pranks and mischief. He once started brewing and selling moonshine in the student dorms in order to pay the debts of a struggling orphanage, and that was one of the lighter-hearted tales.

Once, he dressed as a girl and put his own body on the line in order to catch a member of staff engaging in inappropriate conduct. Another time, he stole a Chasseur from the training grounds and took it into the city to eliminate a slave-trading ring.

Every time, Fiarca and Ras were sucked into his schemes, and every time, they ended up dealing with the aftermath.

When viewed in that light, Fiarca's situation seemed like her brother's final prank. Perhaps even Ras's appointment as a Guardian of Silver was a fate the man couldn't escape.

Fiarca noticed the warm smile that came to Ras's lips unbidden. "You love him, don't you?" she said, puffing out her cheeks. "You always have."

"I wouldn't put it like that."

"But it's true. You respected him more than anyone else. That's why you broke contact after you thought I died; because you didn't want to break that image of him. Auriol was perfect, unshakable, and it would ruin all that if you saw him crying over the sister he allowed to die."

"Maybe you're right," said Ras awkwardly. He hadn't realized it until Fiarca had pointed it out, but it was true. Fiarca's death alone couldn't make Ras abandon his best friend, no matter how much it hurt. Avoiding Auriol wouldn't bring her back. The real reason he went into hiding was because he couldn't be sure he wouldn't hate the man if the two met again. Just like Fiarca said, he was afraid of reality not living up to the Auriol in his mind.

"You don't need to worry," said Fiarca kindly. "Right up until the end, he was the brother you knew and loved."

It was the truth. With one bold move, Auriol had secured his nation's future and saved his sister's life. There was no end more fitting for a man so uniquely remarkable.

"I just wish he didn't have to die," uttered Ras. He stared at the headstone bearing a name that didn't belong. Within the heavy stone tomb, Ras almost felt he could see the blue-eyed boy smiling, his final joke to the world accomplished.

"You don't have to blame yourself, Ras. It's not your fault."

Fiarca sighed.

"And it's not mine, either." She shrugged. "Auriol chose me to survive because I have a duty to this country. As much as I hate that way of thinking."

"If you hate it so much, why did you do it? Why did you dress up as Auriol and take on his duties?"

"Well, I couldn't just leave the empire in somebody else's hands, could I? They'd do a miserable job of managing it. I'd turn my back for a month or two, and the whole realm would be on fire."

"…You could have said something like 'Because I love my people' or whatever," said Ras with a sly smirk.

She was right, though. Ras couldn't deny the princess's pride was warranted. The task of guiding her country couldn't have fallen to a better person.

"You need more than cheap platitudes like that to run a nation," said Fiarca, grinning. Then turning to him, she added, "And on that note, Ras, the moment someone is fit to sit on the throne in my place, I want to leave."

"You mean…you want to abdicate?"

"I'm thinking of quitting the imperial family and becoming a commoner. Once Princess Tishna bears a child, our empire will have a clear successor again. After that, it won't matter where I go, will it?"

Fiarca spoke as though what she was saying wasn't earth-shatteringly absurd. Ras could only stare back at her in silence.

She was pretending to be her dead brother and entering into marriage with a foreign princess. Even if Princess Tishna agreed to cooperate, it was only a matter of time before the truth came out. Fiarca knew that. That was why she came up with a plan B for if she needed to make herself scarce. If a child was born with a strong claim to the imperial throne, then Fiarca could fake her own death and retire from public life forever.

"But who's going to run the empire after you're gone?" asked Ras. "Even if there's an heir, it'll be a long time before he's suited to sit on the throne."

"I'll ask Princess Tishna to do it," Fiarca replied. "It's common practice for the emperor's consort to take over if he dies. And she'll have you and the prime minister helping her, so she won't be able to do too much damage."

"And what will you do if it turns out Princess Tishna isn't someone you want to leave the empire's future with?"

"Then I'll marry someone else and have you get her pregnant, too."

"Get her pregnant? I seem to recall agreeing to seduce a princess, not have a child with her."

"Obviously you need to have a child with her," said Fiarca. "The whole point is that we need a legitimate heir."

"So that was the plan all along? Why didn't you tell me earlier?!"

Ras glowered at Fiarca. Her whole scheme had been predicated on Princess Tishna producing a legitimate successor. Logistically speaking, only Ras had the necessary *equipment* for that part.

"Your grandmother was the little sister of the previous emperor," Fiarca explained. "So any child of yours will have imperial blood in their veins. You don't have to worry on that front. Besides, what's a few more adulterous relationships at this point, Stallion? I'm willing to overlook it out of the goodness of my heart."

Listening to her sarcastic tone, Ras finally understood. For all her talk, Fiarca didn't want to have to send Ras to be with other women.

In fact, she probably still bore a grudge over Ras visiting brothels so often while he thought she was dead.

Ever since the pair's academy days, Fiarca had been just as capable of jealousy as any other woman, and that was unlikely to have changed in the years since. Ras could sense as much from the displeased tone Fiarca was doing her best to hide.

However, it wasn't worth pressing the issue further, so Ras changed the subject.

"What did you bring me here for, Fi? I'm guessing it wasn't just to tell me all this."

Fiarca raised her eyebrows, surprised.

"You mean you figured it out already?"

"You never were the type to visit graves."

"How rude. You make it sound like I have no respect for the dead," Fiarca objected. "But as it happens, there is something else I wanted to do while I was down here."

"And that is?"

"Have you forgotten already? The emperor bestowed you a Chasseur."

When Fiarca said that, Ras suddenly remembered. He had been granted a custom model as a reward for slaying the Greater Dragon two years ago.

"The Chasseurs of the imperial family are stored beneath this mausoleum, away from prying eyes," explained Fiarca. "Some of them have rather…uncomfortable pasts."

Fiarca turned and stared deeper into the passageway. Seeing the tense look on her face, Ras couldn't help but feel a little uneasy.

3

Ras and Fiarca descended a stone staircase, their path lit by the glowing aura sphere, until they arrived at a large underground hall, walled in by magnificent arches, that was almost the size of the cathedral above. There the pair encountered many Chasseurs in

varying states of repair, scattered about the space like decaying statues in a ruined temple.

"Why is the imperial family hiding these down here?" asked Ras, perplexed. The dark stone walls of the subterranean chamber amplified his voice to a surprising extent.

"Some of the imperial Chasseurs are better kept out of sight," said Fiarca. "Apparently, people decided the mausoleum was the perfect place for that. Members of the imperial family can come and go as we please, and nobody else would ever choose to come down here."

The way Fiarca spoke suggested to Ras that the princess had not been involved in the decision.

"You mentioned 'uncomfortable pasts,'" he said. "What did you mean by that?"

"Chasseurs seemingly cursed to bring death to anyone who rides them, cultural artifacts plundered from other nations, units once used to conduct secret assassinations, that sort of thing."

"And that's what your father decided to give me as a gift? Sounds like a poisoned chalice, if you ask me."

"The *Vildhjärta* is…an exception. It doesn't technically belong to the empire at all. We're only holding on to it."

"Holding on to it?"

Ras frowned.

"Yes. Until a worthy successor arrives. That's what we were told."

"And that's supposed to be me? Are you sure about this?"

"It has to be you, Ras. There isn't another aura knight in all the realm who can do the things you do."

Ras briefly wondered what gave the princess the confidence to speak like that, when she suddenly cast her eyes downward.

"Actually," she said, "we're still not sure whether we can give it to you."

"You're not?"

"The previous owner of the *Vildhjärta* sent me a message. It said to bring you down here tonight."

Fiarca's tone was uncharacteristically meek, and she let out a brief sigh. Ras guessed she must be feeling guilty from bringing him along on what were arguably false pretenses.

"Do they want to test me?" spat Ras with clear annoyance. "Who is the previous owner anyway?"

Ras had never asked for the *Vildhjärta* in the first place, and now he was expected to prove himself worthy of riding it. It was starting to get on his nerves, but for some reason, Fiarca looked at him and grinned.

"I think you're better positioned to answer that question than I am," she said.

"What?"

"Now then… According to what I was told, it should be just beyond here."

Without deigning to explain further, Fiarca raised her ball of light. A chemical reaction using hydrogen in the air produced diphenyl oxalate, causing a bright glow to fall upon a single Chasseur standing at the back of the hall.

It was a frightening sight, a jet-black body that almost seemed to melt into the shadows.

"There it is," said Fiarca. "The *Vildhjärta*."

"What kind of grouch decided to paint it that color?" asked Ras, approaching the frame. There were no hard-and-fast rules when it came to painting Chasseurs, but in practice, black was something of a rarity, especially for a custom unit. That was because Chasseurs were a symbol of a house's prestige, and typically painted with bright colors and intricate designs to inspire courage on the battlefield and bring hope to a lord's people. It wasn't worth trying to camouflage a unit, as the sight of a Chasseur spewing crimson aurons was difficult to hide.

And so the jet-black Chasseur unnerved Ras. It called into question everything he knew.

"A grouch? You're a brave man to be throwing around a word like that, Ras."

"Am I? I think anybody would say the same."

Ras was a little confused why the princess stiffened just then, but he thought nothing of it.

"It looks like it's encased in something," he remarked.

"That's right. They're called aura crystals, I hear."

Fiarca walked up to the Chasseur and tried to touch its leg, but just before her fingers reached the metal, there was a sharp-pitched noise and the princess's hand was repelled. The entire frame of the unit appeared to be coated in a layer of transparent crystal, almost invisible, like polished quartz.

"Thanks to them, the unit inside is completely isolated from air and temperature changes," Fiarca explained. "The *Vildhjärta* was fully repaired and put into stasis straight away, so it could probably stay in pristine condition for another hundred years or so. Those aura crystals are as solid as diamond."

To demonstrate, Fiarca drew the sword at her hip and swung it against the barrier. However, the blade bounced harmlessly off without even scratching the unit's paintwork. An aura knight's sword could pierce steel, but even it was no match for the aura crystals.

Fiarca returned her sword to its sheath. "The problem is," she said, "we don't know how to dispel the barrier."

"You don't?" said Ras with a sigh and a shake of his head. "Then what's the point of it? It's just a giant eyesore."

"I didn't say it couldn't be dispelled, Ras. I only said *we* don't know how."

"So then…the previous owner? They know how to free it?"

"That's right. Well, I hope they do anyway," Fiarca added with a shrug and a cheeky grin. "The last time the *Vildhjärta* saw battle was twenty-seven years ago, toward the end of the Shrumland War. This unit, by itself, fended off the stampeding Sand Dragon that arose from the Lagyllia Desert. This is a mythical Chasseur, Ras. The deeds it's performed aren't even in the records."

"Wait a minute. You don't mean…"

Ras shivered. The blood drained from his face immediately. There was only one person who slew a Sand Dragon twenty-seven years ago, and it was someone Ras knew very well.

"That's right, Ras. The *Vildhjärta* previously belonged to the Black Blade."

Fiarca nodded gravely. The Black Blade, Fon Cigel. One of only four people on the continent who had attained the highest level of auramancy mastery. The owner of the ParadiasH brothel in Prouss, and Ras's teacher.

"I see. Oh god, it all makes sense now."

Ras couldn't keep his hands and voice from trembling. The emperor owed Fon a great deal, so it wasn't out of the question that she might ask him to hold on to a Chasseur for her. Ras could imagine no safer storage vault than the Prata Cathedral.

He immediately turned on his heel and started walking away. Fiarca called after him.

"Ras? Where are you going?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm getting the hell out of here before she shows up."

"What? Why?"

"I can't meet Fon now. Who knows what that crazy woman will do to me?"

Just then a voice issued from the darkness, causing Ras to stop in his tracks like he'd been frozen in ice.

"That's not a very nice thing to say about your teacher, Ras. Do I need to teach you a lesson?"

"…?!"

The voice came from above. Craning his neck, Ras spotted a rather petite woman standing on the shoulder of the jet-black Chasseur. She looked about Ras's age, perhaps even younger, with strikingly large eyes that glinted amber in the darkness like a cat's. Her black hair, haphazardly cut to shoulder length, possessed streaks of red running through it. It was a common feature of the most powerful auramancers.

She was wearing very little; just a few pieces of clothing that looked like underwear, and a black leather mercenary coat over them. Her belly and upper chest were completely exposed. No ordinary visitor would be allowed to walk about the imperial palace dressed so outrageously, but the woman was anything but normal. She was Fon Cigel, the Black Blade.

"Fon!" Ras exclaimed.

"You've landed quite a cushy job, Ras. How come you didn't send me a letter? Boo-hoo."

Fon placed her hand to her cheek and made puppy-dog eyes at Ras. However, her childish behavior elicited only a horrified shiver from her pupil.

"Wait, Fon, you don't understand! I was taken from Prouss against my will! I haven't forgotten our promise, I swear!"

"*Sob.* Is that really true, Ras?"

"Yes. The palace was supposed to have sent you a messenger to explain…"

"So I heard. But Amalie and the girls got to him first, and I never found out what the message was. If you meant him to be a standin for you, Ras, you'll need to send five or six of his buddies along with him."

"That's a soldier of the Imperial Guard," said Ras, burying his face in his palm. "Just what did you do to him…?"

"I don't know what you mean, Ras. We treated him like a guest."

Fon licked her lips seductively.

All the ladies who worked at ParadiasH were experts in their craft, capable of squeezing their customers for every last coin. Not only that, but Fon had trained each and every one of them in the use of auramancy.

Whether Fon's girls treated him to their top-class service, or made him a sparring partner for their first-rate skills, either way it would be a life-changing experience for the poor imperial guard caught in the middle. Ras could only pray the man was still capable of living a decent life after that.

"But enough about him," Fon said. "What was wrong with you in the test match today, Ras? It shouldn't have taken you that long to defeat a second-rate Chasseur like the *Ahajia*. I'm very disappointed in you."

Fon's smile at Ras was like a baring of teeth, and the malice oozing from her words caused Fiarca to flinch.





"Don't be ridiculous," replied Ras. "I was in a *Gent*. It was all I could do just to get past that custom defense system of his."

Unconsciously, Ras lowered his guard. The woman riding the Chasseur was ten meters away, but Ras understood she could kill him with a snap of her fingers if she wanted to.

"Still, you have no right pretending that disgraceful display was one of my techniques. Do I have to remind you what a real Seraphic Blade looks like?"

Fon tore off her coat, and her entire body began surging with aura.

"You're mad, Fon!" yelled Ras, drawing his sword. "Are you really going to use one of your techniques in a place like this?!"

But Fon didn't answer him. Instead, six pairs of enormous crimson wings silently extended from her back, covered in feathers the size and sharpness of short swords. It was a beautiful yet terrifying demonstration of her skill.

A real Over Art, performed by the one and only Black Blade.

Seeing the look of pure terror on his face, Fon Cigel grinned a charming smile, and the next moment, all twelve wings screeched as they flew toward Ras.

4

Twelve blades of concentrated aura spread their sharp-edged feathers and came at Ras from all angles, like an inescapable coffin of knives. This was the true form of the Seraphic Blade, one of the twelve fundamental techniques in Fon's arsenal, the Black Arts. It was a technique made possible only by the bottomless reserves of energy that she alone had the potential to access.

And the most terrifying part of all was that each one of those carefully crafted blades was equal in strength to an ordinary aura knight's most desperate, powerful attack.

For all the beauty its name inspired, Seraphic Blade was a fiendish, brutal art.

“Haaah…”

Seeing Fon smirk at him from the other side of a wall of aura blades, Ras let out a languid sigh.

Seraphic Blade produced an attack from every conceivable angle at once. It was impossible to block, but that didn’t mean you couldn’t avoid it. All the blades had to move in perfect harmony with one another, and if two collided, both would be annihilated. As a result, their paths couldn’t cross.

That left a gap. Of course, it was a gap that only existed for a fraction of a second, and it was barely large enough that a human body could fit through it, but if anyone could capitalize on it, it was the student of the Black Blade. If Ras couldn’t even do that, Fon’s training would have spelled his end a long time ago.

“You really like to push me, don’t you?” yelled Ras, combing back his hair, which was disheveled by the wind. “Are you trying to get your own student killed?”

The stones at his feet shattered, pulverized to dust by the force of the technique. When it was over, only a fan-shaped zone of death remained. That and Ras himself, standing at its center, completely unharmed. Only his sleeves and the tassels on his uniform were even slightly scathed.

“Don’t be silly, Ras. I was going easy on you; you know that,” said Fon, a smirk appearing on her lips. “Or are you trying to say this isn’t enough for you? Okay, then. I haven’t cut loose in a while. Let’s take the kid gloves off!”

With that gleeful declaration, Fon pulled her sword from its sheath. There was no stopping her at this point; Ras knew that painfully well. Fon was an amazing teacher, but more than that, she was a tyrant.

However, before the two could come to blows, one reckless figure stepped between them. It was Fiarca.

“That’s quite enough, Fon Cigel.”

“Oh.”

At that moment, Fon seemed to register the princess's presence for the first time. Dressed as her brother, with the mask covering half her face, Fiarca stood fearlessly before her.

"These are the burial grounds of my ancestors. It matters not if you are one of the four Blades; even you cannot disturb this sacred place."

"Get out of the way, Fiarca!" Ras called out without thinking. The Blades were powerful enough to be bound to no organization. The only one who could hold them to account was another Blade. Even the princess of the imperial family couldn't order one of them around. In fact, Fon Cigel could cut the princess down, right here, in cold blood, and nobody would be able to do a thing about it.

"…Fiarca? Did you say Fiarca? Fiarca Jeva Argenteia?"

Fon's eyes widened in surprise. While the princess was dressed in Auriol's clothes, she was making no attempt to hide her gender. Faced with a princess who was supposed to be dead, even Fon was taken back.

"Ah, I see. Now I get it."

Hopping down from the Chasseur's shoulder, Fon landed in front of Fiarca and began studying her face rudely.

"You're Ras's fiancée, aren't you? The one who died in the war."

"…Eek!"

Fon suddenly grabbed Fiarca's rump, causing her to yelp. It seemed like she hadn't predicted the woman would make such a bold move on their very first meeting. Of course, even if Fiarca had predicted it, she wouldn't have been able to stop her.

"That explains it," Fon said. "I was wondering what on earth could have possibly convinced Ras to turn over a new leaf. If he's back in bed with his old flame, then that makes a lot more sense."

Fon seemed to have come up with her own reasons for Ras's behavior without any outside help. Ras said nothing in his defense. If Fon found that explanation easy to swallow, then so be it. Besides, it was probably a waste of time to try to convince her otherwise.

"If I had to guess, I'd say you came up with this little ruse in an attempt to prevent your country from being divided into civil war," said Fon. "Deceiving not only your people, but your own fiancé as well. You may look like an angel, Princess, but there's a real devil in your heart, isn't there? Not bad!"

"Huh?"

Fiarca didn't expect to suddenly earn the Black Blade's praise. She blinked a few times in astonishment.

"I respect a woman who doesn't care how history remembers her," said Fon. "I think I like you, Princess Fiarca. I can see why Ras fell for you."

With that, Fon stepped up to Fiarca and gave her a great big hug. The imperial princess had no idea what was happening, and even if she did, there was nothing she could do against the Black Blade's strength—even though Fon was shorter than her, there was no escaping her grip.

"If I learned you'd lured Ras away with promises of fame and glory, I had a mind to cut you down on the spot," Fon said without a hint of shame. "But since it's for the girl he loves, I guess I can overlook it. How's that for generosity, huh?"

Ras felt a chill run down his spine. Fon's words sounded selfish at first, but the pupil of a Blade was no laughing matter. If a nation got its hands on that kind of power for selfish needs, it could topple another country easily.

"Does that mean you will allow us to grant your Chasseur to Ras?" asked Fiarca calmly, once Fon finally let go of her.

"My Chasseur? You mean the *Vildhjärta*?"

Fon looked back at the Chasseur she had just dismounted. It was still sleeping within its invisible shell, completely ignorant of the commotion unfolding at its feet.

"That has nothing to do with me," said Fon simply. "It's not my decision to make."

"What do you mean, it's not your decision?" asked Ras.

The *Vildhjärta* was Fon's machine. Ras had assumed that in order to ride it, he first needed to earn her approval. But from the way she was speaking, it didn't sound like that was the case.

"I mean what I said. If you want to ride the *Vildhjärta*, you'll need to ask her yourself. It doesn't matter whether *I* accept you."

"What…?"

Ras gulped. He suddenly understood what Fon was getting at.

"Of course," he said. "The *Vildhjärta* is alive!"

"That's right," said Fon. "It's not strange for custom Chasseurs to have a mind of their own. The *Vildhjärta* is one of them."

Fon walked over to the Chasseur and brushed her hand against the crystal casing, a protective layer so hard that even a ceramic blade had not been able to damage it. At her touch, it fractured, before exploding into a shower of crimson particles. The cloud of aurons was sucked into the *Vildhjärta* through the gaps in its armor, and like a sleeping giant, it began to stir. The jet-black Chasseur was waking up.

"Good luck, Ras. I'll be here, cheering you on."

With a smile and a wave, Fon took a step back. Ras finally understood what he was here to do. To earn the right to command the *Vildhjärta*, Ras needed to break it—to take it on in single combat and win.

5

The jet-black Chasseur had awakened from its slumber, and it now towered in the gloom.

A normal Chasseur's height exceeded nine meters. Custom models, with their multicore engines, were often even larger than that. However, the *Vildhjärta* was even more enormous. At a glance, the Chasseur resembled a statue of a beautiful goddess, clad in a flowing dress, but the two units strapped to its back, like wings, made it more resemble an angel of death. Three eyeballs installed

into the head flickered like flames in the night, then converged on Ras at once.

"What the…?! It doesn't need a jockey to act?"

Sensing the Chasseur's intent as though it were a real person, Ras leaped back. Not a moment later, the *Vildhjärta*'s left foot came down and crushed the flagstones to dust where he had been standing. The impact showered Ras in shards of broken rock.

"That's ridiculous!"

There was no mistake; the *Vildhjärta* had attacked Ras of its own volition. A Chasseur, a mere machine without its rider, had acted aggressively toward a flesh-and-blood human.

"Ras!" Fiarca called out in terror. Her eyes were directed toward the stone pillars holding up the grand arches of the underground chamber. The room was large, but not infinitely so, and humans had built its supports. They weren't so strong they could weather an attack from a Chasseur. If a pillar fell, the entire ceiling could come crashing down.

If that happened, the cathedral above would not escape harm. The palace and its gardens could be in danger, too. Fon obviously knew that, and she also knew that even her legendary arts wouldn't save her from a cave-in of that magnitude.

And yet Fon did nothing. The look on her face told Ras he was going to need to fight this battle alone. Just as he suspected all along, he wasn't going to be able to count on her help.

Instead, it was Fiarca who calmly gave Ras some advice.

"Remember, it's just a Chasseur, Ras. They're programmed not to defy their rider."

"Of course," Ras muttered to himself. He'd been so blinded by the shock of seeing a Chasseur act autonomously that he'd forgotten one very important point. A Chasseur was a machine, built to respond to the inputs of an auramancer.

In the center of the *Vildhjärta*'s chest piece, there was a hatch that led to the cockpit. If Ras managed to enter it, he could stop the

rampaging unit. That was why Fon seemed so unconcerned; she knew there was that way out.

Ras took a deep breath, composed himself, and called upon the aura within.

Humanity didn't yet fully understand the nature of aura, but it was thought to be a special kind of energy that grew when filtered through the human body. This energy was capable of interacting with physical matter and naturally occurring aurons in the air to produce various supernatural effects.

For an aura knight, this typically involved altering the chemical makeup of their own body, elevating their physical performance to superhuman levels.

With the muscles in his legs thus enhanced, Ras took a flying leap. His target was, of course, the *Vildhjärta*'s cockpit hatch.

However, the *Vildhjärta* didn't let him reach it so easily. All of a sudden, the jet-black Chasseur ceased its tireless assault and retreated a step, swinging its left arm at Ras to keep him away.

"You're kidding…!"

Ras used the arm as a springboard, catapulting himself high overhead. The *Vildhjärta* followed with a second attack, but Ras launched himself off the ceiling to avoid it, barely managing to land back on the ground unharmed.

"Oh dear, Ras. It looks like the *Vildhjärta* really doesn't like you," came the teasing voice of Fon Cigel.

"A Chasseur treating its own jockey like an enemy?" replied Ras, aghast. "I've never heard of anything so outrageous!"

The previous exchange of blows had taught Ras all he needed to know. The *Vildhjärta* was not just blindly reacting to his moves; it had registered Ras as a threat and was actively trying to prevent him from reaching the cockpit. There was little Ras could do to enter a Chasseur that didn't want to be ridden. It was a humanoid robot over five times his size, and its speed alone eclipsed Ras's own.

Ras's physical enhancements were just enough to allow him to dodge the *Vildhjärta*'s blows. He couldn't get close to the cockpit

without a plan. Ras found himself almost wishing he were fighting a fiend instead.

"I need to find some way to slow the *Vildhjärta* down," muttered Ras. *But how?*

The next moment, he sensed a spike of aura, and a loud, clear voice echoed through the chamber.

"Greater Ice Blast!"

An intricate array of aura pathways appeared in the air, triggering residual aurons to undergo metamorphosis. It was a technique devised to conjure up a sudden flood of supercooled water. Large blue spheres appeared around the *Vildhjärta*'s legs, freezing them instantly, and a thick layer of ice began to form across the ankle and knee joints of the jet-black Chasseur.

"Thanks, Fiarca!" Ras yelled, breaking into a sprint. Greater Ice Blast was eighth-level advanced auramancy. There weren't many auramancers who could perform it, even among the army's top ranks, but with the blessings of the imperial bloodline, Fiarca could do so easily.

With its legs encased in ice, the jet-black Chasseur could no longer take a single step. While it swung both its arms wildly, that was nothing Ras couldn't avoid, and he soon arrived at the cockpit hatch.

However, the moment he grabbed the manual override lever, he had an overwhelming premonition of dread, and he instinctively leaped back. The next second, an endless flurry of aura blades assailed the spot he had just vacated.

Landing safely back on the ground, Ras turned to his teacher. "Fon!" he shouted. "What the hell are you doing?!" It was none other than her who had fired the technique that stopped Ras from entering the *Vildhjärta*.

But Fon ignored him. Instead, she walked up to Fiarca.

"Casting advanced auramancy by yourself? Impressive work, Princess. I think you're starting to grow on me."

The smile on her face was gone, replaced by a deadly serious stare. She didn't seem too happy that Fiarca had intervened in Ras's

battle with the *Vildhjärta*.

"But I'm afraid that's against the rules," she said. "Bad little girls have to be punished."

"I thought I told you that no disturbances were allowed in this place," Fiarca replied, unflinching in the face of Fon's aggression. "That goes for you and that Chasseur as well."

She stared directly into Fon's eyes, allowing not even a tremor to enter her voice.

"Hmm. You're a special one, Princess. Is that how you got Ras to fall in love with you?"

Fon grinned fiercely. The anger in her eyes vanished, replaced by a twinkle of curiosity.

"I know," she said. "If Ras loses this battle, you have to come work for me."

"Work for you? At the brothel?" replied Fiarca, astonished. The very idea of an imperial princess working at a house of ill repute was laughable, to say nothing of the casual way Fon had imposed her claim. Fiarca had no incentive to take her up on her wager.

"Well, it's not fair only Ras gets to fool around at my establishment, is it? I bet the men will love you, and I'll teach you the tricks you need to please them."

Fon went on as though the outcome were a sure thing and punctuated her words with a cute wink. She really didn't seem like a woman in her fifties at all.

"What are you telling her, Fon?! Leave her alone!" yelled Ras, furious, but Fon ignored him still. Fiarca shook her head in disbelief, and a combative smile appeared on her face.

"I thank you for your offer," she said. "But it makes no difference whether I accept your bet. If you once tamed the *Vildhjärta*, then there is no reason why Ras cannot do the same. My victory is assured."

"Oh? Does that mean you accept, Princess?"

"If you insist. However, should Ras and I win, then we will require something from you, Fon Cigel. You shall listen to one of my

demands; one time only, of course."

The silver-haired princess directed her piercing eyes upon those of the Black Blade. The Blades had all agreed to refrain from international politics. Fiarca was asking Fon to break that unwritten rule and work for her. If Fon accepted, she could very well risk angering the other Blades and bringing their swords down on her neck.

"Heh-heh," she chuckled. "That might be fun as well."

Fon accepted Fiarca's bet, which meant that Fiarca was sworn to uphold her end, too. She turned to Ras and called out to him.

"So you have it, Ras. Stop playing around with that machine and teach it who is the master, and who the steed."

Fiarca's calmness was flabbergasting. Humans and Chasseurs were in such different leagues that it was madness to even imagine a battle between them. But she believed in Ras. She knew that, if he put his mind to it, he could end this battle in an instant.

"I could do *without* you making things any more difficult than they already are," Ras muttered back, drawing his sword. It was a relatively short ceramic blade, not one meter long, forged of partially stabilized zirconia. For all its hardness, it was difficult to imagine its utility in a fight against an enormous Chasseur.

Yet Ras stared down his opponent and adopted a very peculiar stance. Turning his left side toward the enemy, he held his sword in his right hand only, taut with tension, like a bow about to snap. Aura began gathering in the blade, causing the material to glow brightly. A blinding light that seared the eyes of all who looked at it.

"An Over Art…," murmured Fiarca, her voice trembling. She had never seen Ras adopt this stance before, but an Over Art was the only way any human stood a chance at damaging the body of a Chasseur. Against the *Vildhjärta*, however, success was anything but guaranteed. Even Princess Fiarca had no idea which way the battle would go.

"He's using Vajra," commented Fon. "One of the fundamental Black Arts. I suppose he's right; that *would* be able to cut through the

Vildhjärta's hide…"

She looked rather disappointed, an understandable reaction given that Ras was getting ready to slice up her old Chasseur. However, it didn't look like she planned to stop him this time.

"I didn't want to have to use this…," Ras said with a sigh. Partially, he felt guilty about damaging the *Vildhjärta*, but more than that, he was reluctant to reveal this Over Art to his master. He just knew that if she found out he'd picked up a new technique, she would be raring to challenge him to a fight afterward.

Meanwhile, the *Vildhjärta* noticed Ras's stance and began trembling in anger. Crimson aurons spewed from every gap, shattering the ice at its feet and propelling it forward.

Even an Over Art couldn't halt the *Vildhjärta*'s mad charge.

But Ras wasn't expecting it to.

As the jet-black Chasseur raised a leg to stomp, Ras leveled his sword and unleashed the aura stored within.

Vajra was the only pure thrusting move among the twelve fundamental techniques of the Black Arts. Of all the attacks that Ras had learned from Fon, this was the one with the highest penetrative power. One hit could bore straight through a Chasseur's armor and take out the delicate machinery inside, shutting it down in a single blow.

However, Ras wasn't aiming for that. His target was not the *Vildhjärta* at all. Instead, he aimed his technique at the ground where the Chasseur was about to tread. The aura-charged blade cut a hole several meters deep into the solid rock of the mausoleum floor, catching the *Vildhjärta*'s leg and causing the Chasseur to topple to the side. Had there been a pilot in the cockpit, perhaps they could have avoided this with their quick thinking, but the *Vildhjärta* was currently unmanned.

As the Chasseur pitched forward, Ras prepared his true attack—not with his sword but by gathering aura in his bare hand. A magic-infused punch, delivered from the same stance as the Vajra. When

Fon realized what technique Ras was planning to use, she called out its name.

"Vajra Dorje Strike!"

One of the forty-eight inner techniques of the Black Arts—an advanced form of the Vajra. Nine successive blasts of concentrated aura combined into a blast wave that struck the legs of the oncoming Chasseur. With both legs torn from under it, the *Vildhjärta*'s momentum brought it up and over, before it slammed hard onto its back. The entire subterranean chamber shook like there was an earthquake. Even Fiarca was stunned speechless by the sight.

Ras had planned to taunt the *Vildhjärta* with his Over Arts, before using the machine's speed and momentum against it. In doing so, he had effectively executed a martial-arts throw on an opponent over five times his size.

"Now I have you, *Vildhjärta*!"

Ras calmly walked up to the jet-black Chasseur and entered the cockpit hatch, but the *Vildhjärta* still wasn't ready to accept him. It spewed aurons in every direction in a show of intimidation, aiming to harm the pilot through auron feedback.

However, by establishing an auron link, the *Vildhjärta* was effectively handing Ras the reins. For it was through aurons that an auramancer asserted their control over a Chasseur.

Ras called upon his aura to intercept the incoming aurons, imposing his own will upon the machine. Through the link, he felt the Chasseur cry out in pain and anger, but he didn't try to stifle those feelings. If the *Vildhjärta* lashed out any more, the entire underground chamber could collapse.

A voice echoed in his mind.

"Get out."

A voice carried not through the air but through ripples in the aurons. It was the *Vildhjärta*'s voice. If it could no longer eject him by force, it had to speak instead. Hearing its voice in his mind was

not an unpleasant feeling, but Ras was taken aback all the same. It was the first time a Chasseur had spoken directly to him.

"Get out of me. You do not belong."

"Sorry, but my princess's virginity is riding on this."

Ras answered using his own aura. Usually, when an aura knight rode a Chasseur, external sounds were transmitted through their aura, allowing them to hear what was going on outside. It wasn't too difficult to reverse the operation and transmit one's own thoughts on that connection instead.

"I do not like you. I do not want you. I will kill you."

Ras felt the *Vildhjärta*'s emotions, a red-hot ire, closer in quality to a child's tantrum than true hate.

"Do you, now?" Ras replied. "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint, but I don't really hate you at all."

Ras grinned. It was completely unheard of for a Chasseur to refuse its master, yet Ras didn't begrudge the machine. In fact, he sympathized with it. A Chasseur was made to fight, so it was only fair to give it the choice of what to fight for.

Ras heard the *Vildhjärta* lash out in anger again.

"Humans die! Die so fast! Why join me…only to die?"

"What's that? You feel guilty for getting your jockeys killed?" asked Ras, astonished.

The jet-black Chasseur was not refusing his control for no reason. It was scared. Scared of the fate that might befall those who rode it.

"*We were not created to bring harm to those we carry*," said the *Vildhjärta* in an emotionless tone. Ras sensed the Chasseur was speaking from its heart.

"Then what were you created for?" he asked back.

"Shut up!"

"I never asked to ride you," Ras said, "but after hearing you out, I've changed my mind. I realize now why Fon chose you."

Ras looked around the cockpit and smiled. The seat height and controls were positioned for someone considerably smaller than Ras.

He didn’t need to be told to know the Black Blade had once ridden here.

Sitting in the *Vildhjärta*’s saddle, Ras could feel a strength like nothing he’d ever felt, like that of a wild beast.

He knew the Chasseur possessed a multicore engine, with more than ten cores, if Ras recalled correctly. No ordinary aura knight was capable of handling that amount of power. They would be incapable of commanding it, and the Chasseur would drain them dry instead.

But if one could learn to command it, that would be a great leap toward fulfilling the Chasseur’s original task. The Chasseurs were invented to slay dragons.

“Lend me your strength, *Vildhjärta*. I’m a tough bastard to kill. Even a Greater Dragon couldn’t do it.”

“You lie.”

“I’m not lying. Fon was the same, wasn’t she?”

“Fon…” Ras felt the machine waver, and a little doubt crept into its determination. *“You…and Fon… You fight the same.”*

“We’re dragonslayers.”

The Chasseur recognized the Black Arts. It recognized the work of its old rider. Ras pushed it toward its conclusion. Fon had ridden this unit, killed a Greater Dragon, and lived to tell the tale. Ras was her successor. If anyone could inherit the *Vildhjärta*’s saddle, it was him.

All of a sudden, the hostility in the machine’s voice vanished, replaced with fear.

“*Will you break your promise?*” it asked.

It was considering whether to trust Ras. Perhaps it wanted to but couldn’t be sure.

“Why don’t you join me and find out?”

Ras rejected the Chasseur’s question and offered one of his own. Words were cheap in his eyes. The best way to prove one’s loyalty was through action.

Yet never had he encountered anything so bizarre. A Chasseur with a mind of its own; one that cared for the life of its rider. He still

had no idea who would create such a machine, or how it had come into Fon's hands. He would have to ask her about that.

"Okay. I will. Master."

Ras seemed to have convinced the Chasseur. After it accepted, a bright flood of aurons filled the cockpit. It brought to mind the invocation of an auramancy technique, only Ras didn't feel in danger. It was benign, a mere concentration of energized particles.

When the blinding light finally faded, it revealed a small figure standing before Ras. Ras tensed. He might have even cried out in surprise; he didn't remember. The shock of being attacked by a Chasseur was nothing compared to this.

Suddenly with him in the cockpit was a strange new person: a young girl with a pair of animal ears on her head.

1

The next morning, Ras was sleeping in his quarters in the crown prince's wing of the palace when a loud knock at the door woke him up.

"Excuse me, Sir Talion, I'm coming in!"

In walked the raven-haired imperial guard, apparently in too much of a hurry to await Ras's reply. The levelheaded legate seemed unusually anxious today.

"Kanalayka…?" muttered Ras upon seeing her. "What's the hurry? I thought Fiarca was taking the morning off today."

Ras lazily sat up in bed. He was topless, save for numerous bandages wrapped all around his upper torso. His skin was so pale that he looked like a ghoul who'd just arisen from his own grave.

"That's exactly the problem, Ras! What happened?! I heard she fainted. Is that true?! You were supposed to be with her! Why didn't you protect her?!"

"Sorry, Kanalayka," said Ras, clutching his head. "Could I ask you to keep it down a tad? I've got a terrible hangover, you see…"

"A…a hangover?!" blurted out Kanalayka, aghast. She suddenly noticed the pervasive scent of alcohol in the room. "Wh-what about those bandages?"

"Oh, these?"

Ras lifted his slung arm with little trouble. He recalled his little visit to the sick bay the previous night, and the chaos that had ensued.

"I think the priestess went a little overboard," Ras explained. "It's not as bad as it looks, honest. Just a few cuts, scratches, and bruises here and there. Considering I fought Fon, it could have been a lot worse, and it probably would have been if Fiarca didn't win her over with drinks."

"Fon? You don't mean Fon Cigel, do you?!" Kanalayka shrieked, her eyes wide. "What was the Black Blade doing on imperial grounds?!"

The Blades were the most accomplished swordsmen and -women in all the lands. It stood to reason that Kanalayka, a student of the blade herself, would relish the opportunity to meet one.

Ras thought she might as well not bother, but he didn't say it.

"She was making my life difficult," Ras replied. "I can't believe I had to drink that much just to keep up with her…"

Shaking his head didn't make the pounding go away. Ras groaned.

The previous day, after Ras's training, Fon Cigel had come barging into Fiarca's room and began consuming Auriol's prized wine collection. Ras and Fiarca had been expected to join her, and when dawn came, she suddenly left as though her job there was done. All she left behind were countless empty bottles and the passed-out forms of Ras and Fiarca.

It was possible to treat a hangover with auramancy, but due to its harmful effects on the body, it wasn't recommended. That was why Ras was dealing with his headache the old-fashioned way: with peace and quiet.

"Actually," said Kanalayka, "one of my men said he heard strange rumbling noises coming from the cathedral last night. You wouldn't happen to have had anything to do with that, would you?"

"Yeah. That was the *Vildhjärta*'s fault," Ras replied.

Given the amount of noise the fight produced, Ras figured it was little wonder the sound carried to the surface. It must have caused

quite the stir in the imperial palace, as people wondered just what on earth was going on down there.

"The *Vildhjärta*?" Kanalayka frowned, baffled. "You mean the Chasseur His Majesty gifted you?"

"More like forced on me," Ras said with a shrug and a sigh. "I have a feeling he just wanted to be rid of it."

The *Vildhjärta* was a Chasseur with a mind of its own, capable of autonomous action. Even sealed beneath the palace grounds, its mere existence was nothing but a risk to the imperial family. The emperor surely would have disposed of it long ago if it hadn't been the Black Blade's property.

And then who should wander blissfully ignorant into the picture but Ras, Fon's disciple? He made the perfect scapegoat onto whom to foist the Black Blade's poisoned chalice under the pretense of rewarding him for his great feat two years prior.

The emperor's motivations were clear to Ras now, once it was far too late.

"Do you mind if I ask you something else?" asked Kanalayka, somehow looking even more worried than before. Her gaze was directed at the foot of Ras's bed.

"What is it?"

"Who might this beastfolk child be?" she asked. "Surely you haven't moved on from women and onto the court page boys?"

"Page boys?"

Ras followed Kanalayka's gaze. Curled up on his bedsheets was a child who appeared around ten years of age, sporting animal ears and a tail. All they were wearing was the white shirt that Ras had given them. It was difficult to tell their gender, but they weren't a boy. In terms of physical appearance, they were closer to a girl, but in reality, they were neither. They weren't even a living being in the first place.

"That's not a page boy—that's the *Vildhjärta*," Ras told her.

"What?" asked Kanalayka, blank-faced.

"The *Vildhjärta*," Ras reiterated. Then he deigned to elaborate. "Fon called her an 'external access point.' She's not real; she's made of aurons. It's kind of like the summoned spirits that some auramancers can conjure. Fon says she's capable of gathering information and repairing damage to the main chassis."

"Your page boy is a direct connection to the *Vildhjärta*?"

"I told you she's not my page," said Ras, sighing heavily. He was used to slander by now, but he didn't really want to be accused of diddling little boys on top of everything else. Unfortunately, such rumors were going to be hard to shake with the *Vildhjärta*'s proxy following him around. She was an artificial projection, so her face was as perfectly sculpted as a doll's. If anyone saw her faithfully following in Ras's footsteps around the halls of the palace, they could only draw one possible conclusion.

Suddenly, the girl began to stir, as though roused by Ras's heavy lamentations. She lifted her head and scanned the room with her large pupils. As soon as she spotted Kanalayka, her hair bristled like a cat's.

"Good morning, Master! Who's this? An enemy? Should I kill them for you?"

"Calm down. She's on our side. And weren't you just saying yesterday about how you hated killing people?"

"I'll kill as many as it takes to keep you safe, Master. That is my only purpose."

"Well, don't. Kanalayka's a friend. Got that? A friend."

"A friend! I understand, Master! Let's all play together!"

The *Vildhjärta* threw herself at Ras, who blocked her face with his palm. "You're a Chasseur," he said. "What does it even mean for you to play?"

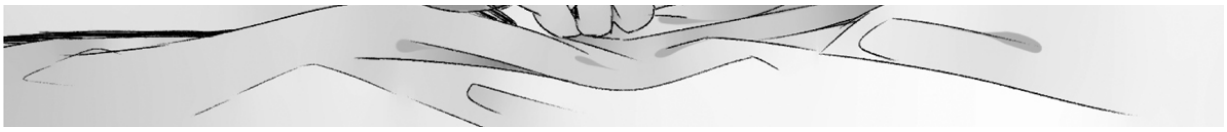
He sighed deeply again and turned to Kanalayka.

"You see what I have to deal with? Would you mind lending me a hand?"

"With what?"

"The *Vildhjärta* needs a tune-up. Where should I go for that?"





"The *Vildhjärta*? Oh, you mean the Chasseur?"

Still struggling to keep up, Kanalayka put her chin in her hand and pondered.

"I know," she said at last. "Let's go see Izai about it. We'll probably be able to use the imperial facilities, seeing as how it's for the *Vildhjärta*."

"Great. Thanks a lot."

Ras breathed a sigh of relief. It took no small sum to keep a Chasseur in good working order, especially a custom model. That was precisely why noblemen and -women used them as symbols of their house's prestige. Luckily, members of Central Command and the Imperial Guard received stipends for this purpose. Even that might not be enough for a model like the *Vildhjärta*, but Izai would surely be able to make it work.

"The only other problem is what to do with her," muttered Ras, glancing at the beastfolk girl beside him, who seemed raring to play.

"I see what you mean," said Kanalayka. "People might start to talk if they see him—I mean, her—following you around."

Kanalayka cast her eyes downward. It didn't look like she had any brilliant ideas, either. Just then a third voice joined the discussion.

"Why don't you just let Shishka look after her?"

Fiarca entered the room. She was lightly dressed, wearing only a nightgown over her underwear.

"Y-Your Highness! You can't go around looking like that!" cried Kanalayka. "You're not even wearing your disguise!"

Even in the crown prince's private quarters, it wasn't unthinkable that someone might come in, and if they did, Fiarca's secret would be out.

The imperial princess was surprisingly pale. In response to Kanalayka's words, she only shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Kanalayka, could I ask you to be quiet? I was with Fon Cigel last night, and I think we drank a little too much."

"Not you as well, Your Highness."

Kanalayka looked up at the ceiling in disbelief.

"So what did you mean by having Shishka take care of the *Vildhjärta*?"

"Hmm… First things first, it's a little confusing having the girl's name be the same as the Chasseur, isn't it?"

Ras walked over to a sofa and lazily plopped himself down on it. "You're right," he said, looking at the girl in question.

The silver-haired princess smiled. "In that case, Ras, you'd better come up with a name for her, hadn't you?"

"A name?!"

The beastfolk girl looked up, a look of pure excitement on her face. Her animal ears twitched expectantly.

"You want me to give her a name?" asked Ras with an displeased grimace.

"Well, you're the *Vildhjärta*'s new owner, aren't you?" replied Fiarca without a care.

"Urgh. Where to begin…," muttered Ras, scratching his head. "What does the name *Vildhjärta* mean anyway?"

"It's ancient Telosian," Fiarca replied. "It roughly translates to 'wild heart.'"

"Wild heart, eh?"

Ras was a little impressed by how well the name suited the jet-black Chasseur.

"Then how about Koko?" he suggested. "*Kokoro* is too long for me."

"Koko! My name's Koko!"

The girl's eyes lit up, and her tail began wagging side to side swiftly. Fiarca and Kanalayka both looked a little unimpressed by Ras's complete lack of imagination, choosing a word that literally meant "heart," but they clammed up upon seeing the girl's reaction.

"Well, as long as she likes it, that's all that matters," said Fiarca, wearing an unconvincing smile. "In that case, Koko can stay here and learn to be a palace servant. If we just say she's from Nerasta, nobody will suspect a thing."

"I see, the Urungul Dynasty, eh?"

Ras nodded, convinced. The continent of Nerasta was far to the west of Argyll, across the Orange Ocean. Urungul was located at its eastern tip, and as a result, it saw active trade with the Argyll Empire. It was also known to boast a comparatively high population of the demi-human hybrids known collectively as beastfolk. In fact, the current ruler of the dynasty, as well as most of the high-ranking nobles, were all beastfolk, and they visited the empire frequently. With a little effort, it wouldn't be difficult to pretend Koko was one of their daughters or something.

"I feel like she looks a little young to be doing that, though," Kanalayka remarked. It wasn't strange for nobles to send their sons and daughters to foreign countries to study, but usually only once they came of age.

"Why don't we say she's a prodigal priestess?" said Fiarca. It was common knowledge that the palace was gathering healers from across the realm, no matter what their background, in an attempt to care for the ailing emperor. Some of them were even as young as Koko's appearance suggested.

"I see, that would give her an excuse to be seen coming and going from the noble residences as well," said Kanalayka, convinced.

"It might make Ras's reputation even worse, though," suggested Fiarca with a snicker.

"Why can't we just leave her with Izai?" asked Ras, a little annoyed.

"It's better to keep her close to your side in case there's an emergency," said Fiarca. "She's able to control the chassis over long distances, right?"

"Yes, I can!" answered Koko. "Should I bring it here now?"

Both Ras's and Kanalayka's eyes shot wide open. It would cause quite a stir for a Chasseur to suddenly land in the middle of the imperial palace. It wouldn't only be Ras's job on the line; most likely, the entire Imperial Guard would be disbanded for such a flagrant breach of security.

However, Fiarca responded cheerfully. “Not yet,” she said. “Wait for Ras’s orders first.”

“Okay! I’ll wait until Master tells me to!”

The young girl smiled. The whole exchange drilled into Ras once more that she was a Chasseur at heart, not a human. She had no concept of right and wrong, only what her master ordered.

Ras’s head began to ache as he thought once more about what a troublesome Chasseur he’d inherited. Having a Chasseur that could activate by itself and come straight to its master’s side was a powerful boon, but it also had the potential to cause untold disaster.

“There you have it, Shishka. The girl’s in your care now.”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

Even this strange turn of events wasn’t enough to faze the ever-loyal servant girl, Shishka Klamina. She simply bowed her head and acquiesced.

“First, we shall have to find you some fresh clothing,” she said. “Come with me, Koko.”

“Master’s the only one who can order me around.”

“I see. That is a shame. I was hoping to give you a treat afterward.”

“A treat?! I’ll do it!”

Ras and Kanalayka were both a little taken aback at how little persuasion it had taken to change the girl’s mind. Could she even eat sweets in the first place? By every metric, the *Vildhjärta* was shaping up to be a rather odd Chasseur.

“I think I’m starting to understand why Fon sealed you beneath the imperial catacombs,” said Ras, sighing. He had been wondering why Fon parted so easily with such a powerful Chasseur, but he couldn’t blame her now.

“Still,” said Fiarca, rising to her feet and adopting a serious look, “everything’s in order now. A Guardian of Silver without their own custom Chasseur is a national embarrassment. We can finally start preparing for the next step.”

“The next step?” asked Ras.

"Surely you haven't forgotten why you were brought here," Fiarca replied.

"Right. To seduce the princess of Charlgia," Ras muttered. The look on his face said he didn't want to be reminded.

"There's only twenty-two days left before the Shrumland Alliance summit begins," Fiarca went on. "I will be arriving a week before the start date, but several of my ministers have departed for Charlgia already. Even some of the citizens are on their way as we speak. Merchants and mercenaries and the like."

"Wherever people gather, money flows," said Ras. "There's no way a canny merchant is going to miss an opportunity like that."

There were four signatories to the Shrumland Alliance: the Kingdom of Charlgia, the Darrol Republic, the Grand Duchy of Agarte, and the Argyll Empire. The summit was to host dignitaries from these four nations, plus their respective teams of bureaucrats and security details. In addition to that, merchants from all across the continent would be closing in on the summit to capitalize. It would undoubtedly be a busy day for the organizers.

"It's not all bad. All those foreign traders boost the economy of the host country quite considerably," said Fiarca. "The main problem is that a group of assassins from inside the empire intends to infiltrate the event alongside them."

"Assassins?!"

"Is that true, Your Highness?!"

Both Ras and Kanalayka cried out in surprise. Fiarca nodded gravely and continued.

"This information comes from a fairly reliable source."

"Are they trying to prevent your marriage to Princess Tishna?" Ras asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. But that is their most likely motive, yes."

The princess spoke coldly and calmly, in spite of the fact it was her own life on the line.

Not everyone was happy with the crown prince's arranged marriage. In fact, a fair few voices opposed it. For example,

domestic noblemen who'd planned to marry off their own daughters to Prince Auriol and increase their own influence, or foreign agents who wanted to sabotage the growing relationship between the nations of Argyll and Charlgia.

It would come as no surprise if some of those voices felt so strongly about the matter that they were prepared to resort to drastic measures, and of course it wasn't only Princess Tishna who had to worry about becoming the target of a political assassination; the marriage could be halted just as easily by taking out Crown Prince Auriol—in other words, Princess Fiarca.

However, if Fiarca was assassinated, that would most likely remain a domestic issue for the Argyll Empire. The same could not be said for Princess Tishna's case. If an Argyllian faction killed the royal princess for their own ends, that would cause further strife between the two nations.

"Which is why I'm asking you to take care of them for me, Ras. If Princess Tishna is killed, all our careful planning will go to waste. Not to mention the war that could result."

There wasn't an ounce of doubt in Fiarca's voice. Ras could scarcely believe she was as hungover as he was. He looked up at the ceiling with dead eyes.

"No rest for the wicked, eh?" he muttered.

2

Four days later, Ras arrived in the Kingdom of Charlgia. The kingdom was located just outside the Argyll Empire's territory, across the vast and precipitous Cabrath Mountains. It possessed little territory, but it had a long history, and many foreign nations recognized the influence of the Charlgian royal family.

As a result, the capital city of Barlama was often chosen to host international conferences and the like. Built on the shores of a vast lake, Barlama was known far and wide as a beautiful city rich in arts

and culture. A network of canals crisscrossed the city streets, while sturdy white walls protected the nation's subjects.

In recent weeks, the main port leading into this elegant city was overwhelmed by a sudden influx of merchants seeking to ply their wares and cater to the continent's upper crust, and the customs posts at the border were bustling with people.

A border official ran his eyes over the papers he'd been handed.

"Taras Kaylian… A mercenary, eh?"

He and his interlocutor were in a Chasseur hangar located near the harbor. It was practically necessary to own a Chasseur if you wanted to cross the border safely, due to the dangerous wildlands that separated Charlgia from its neighbors. Even so, a Chasseur was a dangerous weapon, so its use had to be regulated and controlled. That was why any aura knight with one had to undergo an additional customs inspection to enter the country. Naturally, the inspector had the power to reject the aura knight's entry request and deport them from the border, so it was a good idea to behave oneself around them, no matter how unfriendly they were.

"I'm an aura knight, actually," Ras replied with a cheerful smile. "I'm just working caravan security for now, though."

Ras was entering the kingdom under an assumed name. If word got out that a Guardian of Silver was in the country, it would be very difficult for him to carry out his work undetected. Still, while the name on it was fake, Ras's passport had been prepared for him by the imperial family through the proper means. There was no chance it wouldn't pass inspection.

"Papers?"

"I have an exit permit from the empire. That should be enough, right? You can have my guild registration card, too, if you'd like."

"Hmph. So what have you got in this Caladrius? A Chasseur? What trash heap did you pull this one out of?"

Glancing at the vehicle Ras arrived in, the border guard let out a disgruntled snort. It was a jet-black model he'd never seen before.

The Caladrius was in its compact state, with its wings folded in, but even taking that into consideration, it was considerably smaller than the others in the hangar. The body of the unit, where a cargo container was supposed to go, was completely empty, and you could see the machine's frame beyond, while what armor plating there was had obviously been cobbled together from several different sources. The customs inspector's evaluation was not far off the mark.

"Even so, it's been in my family for generations. Please take care of it," Ras said.

"Don't you worry about that. Security around here is top notch. And even if it weren't, I doubt anyone would want to pinch that piece of junk anyway."

Saying this, the border guard pressed his approval stamp onto Ras's passport. Ras was impressed by his professionality. It wasn't rare for customs officers to drum up false charges and try to extort a bribe. If corruption was this rare in the kingdom, then Ras reasoned crime must be relatively low, too. Any would-be assassin would have a hard time moving around in that kind of environment.

"Try not to piss off the guards, will you? They're all on edge over the summit in a few weeks."

"Thanks. I'll be on my best behavior," said Ras, waving as the inspector departed. Then he took out his pocket watch and breathed a sigh of relief. It had taken longer than expected to make it through the kingdom's immigration checks, but Ras had managed to enter the country without raising a fuss.

The international summit for signatories of the Shrumland Alliance was beginning in eighteen days. Auriol Ref Argenteia, crown prince of the Argyll Empire, was expected to be in attendance, and it was there he would meet Princess Tishna and fall in love. Of course, while it was meant to look natural, that "chance" meeting had already been planned down to the second by government officials of both countries.

Originally, the plan had been for Ras to accompany the crown prince and meet Princess Tishna at the same time. However, that

plan had been scrapped after new information came in regarding the existence of an assassination plot targeting the royal princess.

Ras's new job was to locate any assassins dispatched to the kingdom and eliminate them, along with their coconspirators if possible. It was for this reason that he arrived in Charlgia a little earlier than planned.

The problem was, the empire possessed barely any leads pertaining to the identities of these assassins. That and Ras was essentially working alone. Auriol's arranged marriage to Princess Tishna was still a state secret, so the empire could not publicly dispatch any personnel to Charlgia to help fend off the attack. However, Ras couldn't count on any assistance from the kingdom's side, either. The empire couldn't exactly admit to the kingdom that a cabal of conspirators operating out of their own country was planning to assassinate the royal princess. The most the empire could do, besides sending Ras, was to mobilize all agents of the Silver Fangs operating in the kingdom's territory.

Auriol was expected to arrive in Charlgia seven days before the summit. He would meet Princess Tishna that night. She would be tasked with keeping His Imperial Highness entertained for the duration of his visit. Any assassination attempt was surely going to happen then. If someone wanted to damage the relationship between the empire and the kingdom, that would be the best way to do it.

In other words, Ras had roughly ten days in which to root out and eliminate these assassins. All while navigating the ins and outs of a foreign country. It was a tall order, even for him.

Just then a small girl climbed down from the Caladrius to glare daggers at the departing official. Ras's traveling partner on this voyage was the girl who proclaimed herself the *Vildhjärta*'s external access point and whom Ras had named Koko.

"Urgh. He insulted the *Vildhjärta*!" she whined.

"Calm down, Koko. We don't want anyone finding out the *Vildhjärta* can fly. It's easier to do our jobs if people underestimate

us."

Ras grabbed her by the scruff and pulled her back, half fearing she would assault the border guard if he didn't.

Inside the Caladrius that Ras had arrived in was Koko's "body," the *Vildhjärta*. Many custom Chasseurs came with their own unique equipment, and the *Vildhjärta* was no exception. It was equipped with a flight unit for unaided air travel. While it was not completely unheard of for a Chasseur to have one, such a device was nonetheless not standard. If anyone found out the *Vildhjärta* had one, it would inevitably arouse curiosity. The *Vildhjärta* was once the personal Chasseur of the Black Blade. It would only take one glance from somebody in the know, and Ras's connection to the empire would be revealed.

That was why Ras and company had taken pains to hide the *Vildhjärta*'s identity by covering it in a fake "shell." The result was rather ugly, but it worked wonders at fooling the border guard. Ras inwardly gave his commendations to Izai and the other engineers at Central Command who had helped produce it.

Usually, a Caladrius, laden with a Chasseur, was not capable of the kind of long-range flight necessary to cross international borders. Since Ras was actually using the *Vildhjärta*'s own flight capabilities, however, he was able to reach Charlgia in just one night. Considering that such a journey would usually take a week by land, the *Vildhjärta* was quite the time-saver. The border guard's imprudent remarks did little to damage that fact, but Koko remained furious, growling and baring her canine fangs.

"Grrr… He called it a piece of junk! I'll pulverize him!"

"I know, I know. Just try to forget about it. I'll take you to buy some nice sweets afterward if you do."

"Really?!" Koko's face lit up. "Can we buy some cake? Fiarca told me Charlgia makes the best cakes in the world!"

"…Did she have to?"

As well as the center of arts and culture, the royal capitol, Barlama, was known for its intricate confectionaries. Ras imagined it

wouldn’t be difficult to find a good cake shop if he knew where to look.

All of a sudden, a second woman stepped out behind Koko, wearing a sardonic grin.

“Buying favor with sweets. You never change, do you, Stallion? Even when your target is a little girl.”

With silver hair and violet eyes, the woman was the spitting image of Princess Fiarca, even down to the voice. However, her barbed tone was one Fiarca never used.

She was Elmira Almathe. Personal aide to Crown Prince Auriol, Princess Fiarca’s bodyguard, and now, as circumstances would have it, Ras’s partner on this operation.

“Little girl? Spare me. She’s not even a human being,” Ras rebutted, still holding Koko’s scruff in his grip.

Even though she looked and felt real enough, Koko was made up of aurons. She was nothing more than a communication interface for the *Vildhjärta*.

“I see,” said Elmira. “So as long as they look feminine enough, you don’t even care if they’re human beings.”

“How did you get *that* from what I said?!”

“Forget it. I am not here to comment on your personal inclinations.”

“There’s nothing to comment on!”

“By the way,” said Elmira, forcefully changing the subject, “is there a reason we are disguising ourselves as commoners instead of taking advantage of the privileges afforded to your position?”

Certain rights and considerations could be attained by traveling as an emissary of the Argyll Empire. At the very least, it would smooth out the customs process so that it didn’t take half a day. Nonetheless, Ras had chosen to conceal his identity while traveling, a decision that had cost precious time. In Elmira’s mind, that was time that could have been better spent working on their mission.

“Because we’re hunting assassins,” Ras replied. “It’s far easier to do that if we keep a low profile.”

"I cannot fathom what you expect to accomplish fumbling about by yourself."

"…Have I offended you in some way, Elmira?" asked Ras, giving her a sour look. "You've been on my case for a while now."

"You are a rogue element, Sir Talion. I am simply treating you with the proper distance."

"I'm not trying to make an enemy of you, you know."

"Any eyesore clinging to Her Highness is my enemy."

"Eyesore? What do you mean by that?"

"Student of the Black Blade or no, anyone who would drown their cares at brothels while Her Highness was mourning the loss of her dear brother is nothing but an eyesore. I can scarcely understand what gives you the nerve to return to her as a Guardian of Silver and to even sleep in her room."

Elmira was glaring daggers at Ras, so her tone, while cold and detached, still had a great weight to it.

"What, are you jealous of me or something?"

"Of course I am. I have worked my entire life to live by Her Highness's side."

Elmira's brazen confession left Ras lost for words, but he could see her point. Elmira was a secret agent, born and bred for the sole purpose of being Fiarca's double. Even if Fiarca was officially deceased, it was hard to change the habit of a lifetime, so to speak. If anything, the importance of her position had only shot up.

It was only natural that her feelings toward Fiarca would become more than mere loyalty. However, even knowing that, Ras could do little to assuage her fears.

"I see," he said. "I'm glad Fiarca has someone like you looking out for her."

"I don't think I much appreciate the condescending way you said that, boyfriend."

"Sorry for being her boyfriend, I guess. If you hate me so much, then why did you even come?"

"Would that I had any choice in the matter. Her Highness ordered me to. Circumstances would need to be severely amiss for Her Highness to require my services at this time."

"I suppose you have a point…"

For Fiarca's body double, having to work meant covering for her employer's absence. But if Fiarca sneaked out of the palace while she was supposed to be preparing for important negotiations, there would be chaos. While Fiarca was hard at work within the palace walls, there was nothing for Elmira to do, which meant she couldn't very well refuse when Fiarca asked her to accompany Ras.

"What's more," she said, "you will need my assistance in contacting the agents the empire has established within the kingdom. They will not talk to anyone outside their organization."

"The Silver Fangs…"

The Silver Fangs was a network of intelligence agents that assisted the emperors and empresses of Argyll. If Ras was able to secure their help, his task would be a much easier one. However, making contact wasn't a simple affair. That was why Elmira was sent to Ras's side to facilitate.

"Our agents have already been notified of your arrival," Elmira explained. "All we need to do is wait for them to initiate contact. It may take some time, though."

"Right. I guess we have time for a little sightseeing, then."

"We did not come to Barlama to play, Sir Talion." Glaring at Ras, Elmira sighed, producing from her pocket a tourism guidebook. She cleared her throat and continued. "…However, it would behoove us to learn the lay of the land. First, we must sample this city's culinary offerings. I believe the farmers market should be operating in the town square at this time of day."

"Huh? You mean you're coming with us?" Ras asked blankly.

"Surely you do not mean to leave me behind?!"

Ras was taken aback. Given her attitude so far, he had half expected Elmira to ditch him of her own volition. Instead, she seemed even more keen on sightseeing than Ras and Koko were.

In that case, Ras figured, she might as well go it alone and save him the trouble, but she probably thought Ras would get up to no good if she wasn't peering over his shoulder all the time.

"I'm sorry," said Ras. "I just assumed you didn't want this eyesore blocking your view."

"Eyesore or no, I cannot let you out of my sight."

Elmira stuck to her convictions. It seemed she was keen to keep up the impression she was stuck here against her will.

However, all her efforts were rendered fruitless, as her stomach growled at the very next second. She froze and turned a deeply uncharacteristic shade of red.

Ras tried to contain his laughter, and instead shot her a friendly look.

"…Why don't we go for lunch, then?"

"Lunchtime!"

Koko's eyes twinkled, and the ears atop her head wiggled excitedly. Elmira beat her fists against Ras's back without saying a word.

3

After finishing their sightseeing, Ras and his companions booked a room at a small inn near the center of town. Due to the approaching summit, fares were high, and any cheap rooms were quickly scooped up by the merchants and mercenaries coming in droves to profit off this international event.

Because of that, there was only one room available, and Ras, Koko, and Elmira were forced to share it.

"Everything on this side of the line is my area," declared Elmira, marking a boundary on the floor with rope. "Make sure not to cross it. You try anything with me, and Her Majesty will soon know about it!"

Ras could tell she wasn't thrilled to be sharing a room with the Stallion. She seemed like a mother bird protecting her chicks.

"I know, I know. I'm not going to try anything, I swear. Besides, it's not like we're alone; Koko's here, too."

"Yes, but she is your Chasseur, is she not?"

Elmira shot Koko a dubious glance. Though she looked like an innocent girl, she was in fact Ras's property. If Ras tried any funny business, it was hard to think she'd intervene. She was more likely to aid Ras in his efforts instead, no matter how immoral they were.

Of course, Elmira's worries were not completely unfounded. She was the spitting image of Princess Fiarca—Ras's lover. Perhaps Ras would get lonely not having the real thing by his side and look to take advantage of an imitation instead.

However, in reality, Ras didn't see the resemblance between Elmira and Fiarca at all.

"I have a favor to ask you, Elmira," he said.

"Wh-what is it?! I'll tell you right now, I'm not going to fall for your charms! I am loyal only to Her Highness, and no one else!"

Sitting on the edge of her bed, Elmira crossed her arms over her chest. If Ras didn't know any better, he'd say it was almost like *she* was the one trying to proposition *him*.

"That's not it. I want you to look after Koko for me. I'm heading out."

"Where could you be going at this hour?" asked Elmira, peering through the window at the darkening skies outside. Then she gasped. "Don't tell me you mean to visit the brothels while Her Highness isn't watching?! Is this because I refused you?!"

"No! I'm going to the taverns to collect information! Isn't that obvious?"

Ras sighed, while Koko, splayed out on the bed, registered Ras's words and suddenly sat up.

"The taverns? Don't they serve food there? Yummy! I wanna go, too!"

"Then I shall come as well," said Elmira. "That shouldn't be a problem, should it? So long as you weren't actually planning to visit the brothels, that is."

She leveled a glare at Ras, who just shrugged as if to say "Do what you want."

And so the three of them headed into the night.

◇◇◇◇

"You realize, you could have told me up front you meant the tavern in the Mercenary's Guild and prevented a misunderstanding," said Elmira with a peeved look, sipping a glass of watered-down wine.

The place was a far cry from the seedy establishment she had envisioned. It was bright and clean, more in line with a common restaurant.

There was still a smattering of light in the dusk skies, but most of the stores in the town square had shut their doors. The clientele there mainly consisted of mercenaries and their apprentices, and many of them were armed. A pretty woman like Elmira and a beastfolk girl like Koko stuck out like sore thumbs.

"I didn't mean to cause confusion," said Ras. "That's just what we mercenaries usually mean when we say 'tavern.'"

"I'll believe you, just this once," said Elmira, sighing at Ras's complete lack of guilt. "But don't expect me to be so trusting next time."

The Mercenary's Guild was an organization that connected freelance aura knights and mages with their clients, offering mediation and support to both sides. Each country had their own independent guild, but they all shared information on their members with one another, so that a mercenary could go into any branch, even one in another country, and have access to the same services.

For some reason, it was customary for the guildhall to possess a tavern, and it was here that local mercenaries often gathered. Not only was the food and wine considered good quality for the price, but it was also an excellent place to pick up rumors and leads.

The Charlgian guildhalls were even stranger in that they all offered an extensive dessert menu. Koko was busy stuffing her cheeks with

one of the offerings.

Just then two men who were clearly mercenaries approached Ras's table.

"Ho there, strangers. Haven't seen you around before," said the first, a tough-looking guy probably around his midthirties. He wore a set of light armor commonly associated with aura knights, with a large ceramic sword strapped to his back.

Elmira responded immediately to their approach by shifting her sitting position slightly, allowing swift access to the dagger hidden up her sleeve. It was a finely honed maneuver, suitable for one trained in the arts of assassination as much as she was. However, the two men immediately threw up their hands.

"Whoa, whoa, we're not looking for any trouble," said the second man, a tall and lanky fellow. From the way he was dressed, he seemed like an auramancer, not a knight, and he must have been fairly adept to pick up on Elmira's subtle intentions.

"The young lady's not as delicate as she looks," said the first man. "And as for Prince Charming…well, I can't quite tell, but I can say for sure he ain't normal. What an enigma we've got here."

Looking Ras up and down, he gave him an affable smile.

"You're more perceptive than you let on," replied Ras. "So much for my plans."

"Ha. So I was right, then. You're the one tryin' to start a fight around here, bringing a woman and child to a place like this."

The aura knight shrugged. Ras had come here to gather information, but there was little chance any self-respecting mercenary would go around blabbing to a complete stranger from a foreign country. If they did, it would likely only be misinformation. Anyone who had the kind of intel Ras was after was sure to understand the value of even the most insignificant-sounding gossip.

However, Ras had ways of loosening lips. The fastest way, of course, was greasing palms or pulling strings. With a trusted individual's introduction, a well-placed coin purse could open a realm of doors for the enterprising investigator.

However, since Ras was working undercover, neither of those options was available to him. Throwing money around was sure to tip off his targets, while leveraging his family name or title would require revealing his identity. As such, Ras had decided to resort to the next best thing—violence.

By bringing such clearly ill-fitting companions to the guild tavern, Ras had been hoping to stir up trouble with a hotheaded mercenary or two. He'd throw a well-placed taunt here and there, then beat them to a pulp the moment they tried to start something. Of course, he'd let them live—but only after they agreed to tell Ras whatever he wanted to know.

Few people would risk being caught in a lie when their own life was on the line, and so long as Ras was the aggrieved party, he could stand to overdo it a little. Best of all, it required the least effort.

However, these two gentlemen had seen right through Ras's scheme—perhaps that was why they had come to stop him.

"We could really do without a fight breaking out here," the aura knight said, his expression grave. "The royal guards ain't takin' no prisoners these days. Got some big do or somethin' comin' up in a few weeks."

It appeared these two men were bouncers of sorts around this place. It was their job to keep things civil, and they had the skill to recognize any potential threats and handle them if it was necessary.

"Well, sorry for making your lives difficult," Ras said, "but you've come at a good time. Why don't you join us, and I'll buy you a round?"

Ras indicated two open seats, while Elmira recognized the potential gains at stake and fetched a couple of drinks. If Ras could get what he needed from a pair of individuals in the know, there would be no need to cause a fuss.

"Might as well," said the aura knight, scratching his head. "Who knows what you'd pull if we didn't?"

The other man, the mage, sighed and sat down in the seat opposite Ras.

"Very well," he said. "What do you want to know?"

"I'm looking for information on the royal family," said Ras. "Especially Princess Tishna."

"Princess Tishna?"

"Why do you want to know about her?"

The two men returned puzzled looks. Ras leaned in a little and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"It's nothing really, but our employer is looking to find a wife for his son, and he's got his sights set high. We've been sent to find out if any bachelorettes of the Charlgian royal family are available."

"Mm-hmm, I get it. So some nobleman's contracting you," said the mage as a look of understanding spread across his face.

Even if Charlgia wasn't the most powerful country out there, a royal was still a royal. Any potential suitor of Princess Tishna's would have to be of good blood; a nobleman's son at the very least, with a member of another royal family being ideal. In Argyll, such candidates would be limited to the Council of Seven and their immediate family, or else Crown Prince Auriol himself.

It was common practice for noblemen to inquire into the reputation and standing of any potential partner. Ras was trying to give the impression he was here for that purpose.

"If your client's lookin' for marriage, I think you're better off lookin' elsewhere," said the aura knight. "But we here in Charlgia ain't gonna complain if you take her someplace far away."

Ras raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?" he asked. "Is there something wrong with her?"

"You're damn right there is. She's a rotten scoundrel, from what I hear. Dirty, childish, and only cares about herself."

"Oi, stop it. That's our princess you're talking about," cautioned the auramancer.

"Everyone's sayin' it," the first man replied with a hearty grin. "I've heard all sorts of horror tales: that she's insulted other noblewomen

and reduced ’em to tears in broad daylight, or she’s saddled royal purveyors with impossible orders and sent ’em packin’ when they can’t make good. She even drove a poor maid to take her own life once.”

“Well, that much is true,” the mage said with a sigh. “I heard she spends like a sailor, too.”

Ras narrowed his eyes. He hadn’t expected to hear that at all. A lustful appetite aside, the current king of Charlgia was a respectable statesman. He couldn’t imagine a man like that would allow his own daughter to behave in such a way.

“Do the king and her brothers not speak out?” Ras asked. “I’ve only heard good things about the men of the royal family.”

“It’s not that they *don’t* speak out; it’s that they *can’t*. Princess Tishna’s mother, the king’s fifth wife, is the queen of Lumede.”

“Lumede? Charlgia’s neighbor? I didn’t think they were such an influential nation.”

“They aren’t,” said the aura knight. “But their territory is all that divides Charlgia from the empire of Registan. From a military standpoint, Charlgia’s gotta keep that alliance alive.”

The Registan Empire spanned the eastern reaches of Danakil. They were led by a military dictatorship that made no efforts to conceal their expansionist agenda, and they were an ever-present threat to the member-states of the Shrumland Alliance, including Charlgia.

With that in mind, Lumede’s importance became clear. It was easy to see how angering them was not a wise decision.

“I see,” said Ras. “So the king’s hands are tied because he doesn’t want to risk angering Lumede.”

“That’s it in a nutshell,” the aura knight agreed. “So tell your client he should find a better princess. There’s six more in our kingdom alone.”

“I’ll do just that,” said Ras. “I’m not sure whether it’ll change this lad’s mind, though.”

Ras flashed a half-hearted smile. The aura knight nodded sympathetically.

"I don't blame him," he said. "Princess Tishna's a real looker, that's for sure."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah. Ain't a fairer face in all the land. People say she'd give Princess Fiarca a run for her money were the poor girl still alive. In terms of spitefulness, I'd say ours has her beat, though."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that…"

Ras tried hard not to chuckle and glanced over at Elmira, who quickly averted her eyes.

4

"So what do you make of it, Sir Talion?"

It had been two days. Elmira was walking with Ras to the Mercenary's Guild when she turned and asked that question. She was referring to the report from a member of the Silver Fangs that the pair had recently received.

"I'm not sure," said Ras. "It seems like most of the kingdom's subjects really do dislike Princess Tishna."

"Indeed. Which matches what we heard from those two fellows the other day," replied Elmira in a businesslike tone.

Elmira had changed the color of her hair using auramancy, because a dead ringer for the late Princess Fiarca was sure to raise a fuss walking around town. She considered this "keeping a low profile," but as it happened, Elmira still turned heads wherever she went. This was because she had merely downgraded from a heart-stopping beauty to a normal one.

"And yet," said Ras, "none of what she's done has actually been a net negative for her country."

"Quite right. According to this report, while her behavior seems selfish, it always ends up to her people's benefit. For example, when she spent lavishly on a new royal villa, it created many new jobs for

impoverished subjects, and when she selfishly ejected a minister she didn't like from the court, that minister turned out to be a Registani spy. All information that only came to light after the fact."

"Fiarca… I bet you knew about all this, didn't you?"

Ras's smile was grim. Tishna's attitude was undeniably that of a spoiled princess, and yet if one looked only at the results, it painted the picture of a kind and caring leader. She was a truly baffling individual. He realized now why Fiarca had been so evasive regarding Princess Tishna's personality; it was a real headache to explain.

"Even these desserts that Koko is so fond of were originally Tishna's idea," Elmira explained. "She demanded the royal cooks bake them for her, and from there, they gradually gained popularity among the commoners as well."

"Mmph?"

Koko looked up, her mouth full of cake. The three of them had passed by a stall selling them earlier, and Koko had made such a fuss that they couldn't move on until Ras bought her one. It was a type of thinly spread pastry known as a galette.

"This is yummy! I like the princess!" said Koko, beaming a jam-caked smile before returning to her pastry. Ras could almost swear she was a real girl and not a man-made war machine.

"This pastry is unique in that it is made with a variety of grain called buckwheat," Elmira explained. "It grows well, even in poor-quality soil. Last year, ordinary grain harvests were exceptionally poor, and many nations faced famine…but they were all saved, thanks to the recent proliferation of this plant."

There was a deeply conflicted expression on Elmira's face. Princess Tishna had saved her country, yet no one would give her credit for it, because it was all done selfishly in the pursuit of sweets.

"It's all too perfect to be a coincidence," said Ras. "But if Princess Tishna really planned this, then her foresight must be incredible. Even Fiarca would have a hard time pulling off a feat like that."

"Surely you jest, Sir Talion. Her Highness could manage a scheme like this in her sleep. Have you not been paying attention to her genius? I can hardly believe Her Highness was to be wed to a man so utterly lacking in dedication. This nation's 'Wicked Princess' is a much better match for a cur like you."

It seemed Elmira's blind devotion to Fiarca caused her to take significant offense to Ras's mild remark. His suggestion that maybe Fiarca wasn't the smartest person in the world was tantamount to blasphemy for her.

"Right, yes, sorry. Anyway, she can't be doing this by herself. There has to be someone pulling her strings—maybe even a whole team."

"On that point, at least, we agree." Elmira nodded.

If Princess Tishna truly intended all along for her acts to benefit her people, she had no need to dress them up as selfishness. That implied someone else was controlling her without her knowledge. If that was true, then this shadowy society would need to be quite powerful. Perhaps that was even the true reason there was an assassination plot against her.

"So what do you intend to do now?" asked Elmira, wiping Koko's mouth with a handkerchief. They were almost at the guildhall and could see it just ahead.

"I want to know more about the princess, but that's none of my business. Right now, we need to figure out who's handling this assassination."

"And how are we going to do that? Even the Silver Fangs have failed to locate the assassins' base of operations. Which can only mean that whoever is aiding them…"

"Yep. It's got to be a member of the royal family," said Ras.

It was no simple matter for a group of foreign assassins to infiltrate the royal capital without leaving so much as a trace, especially during a period of high alert. Only a member of the royal family, or someone with that level of influence, could help achieve

such a feat. If that was the case, it would be impossible to pick up their trail using normal means.

"I had hoped not to cause a scene, but we're out of options at this point."

"What do you mean by that, Sir Talion?"

Elmira shot Ras a worried look, but he declined to elaborate. Instead, he strode through the guildhall doors; however, rather than going to the tavern like usual, Ras walked straight up to the front desk, where a petite young girl was standing.

"Greetings, Miss Ines. I was hoping you could help me with something."

"Oh…Mr. Kaylian? You remembered my name!"

The girl called Ines lit up when Ras approached. The suave and handsome Ras had struck up quite a few conversations over the past couple of days and built something of a rapport with all the guildhall employees, particularly the female ones.

Ras felt that the closer he grew to them, the colder Elmira became, but Ras took no joy in his flirtatious behavior. For him, it was all part of the job.

"Of course I did," Ras replied. "And I like what you've done with your hair today; that barrette really brings out your eyes."

"Oh…no…it's just…"

Ines's cheeks flushed pink, and she stared at the ground, embarrassed. All the other girls on the front desk turned jealous eyes upon her. Sensing trouble afoot if she didn't act professionally, Ines straightened and stood at attention.

"E-er…what's this help you need, Mr. Kaylian?"

"The truth is, I'm from the Argyll Empire, and I'm here to investigate a possible assassination plot."

"A-an assassination?!"

Ines stiffened at the frightening nature of Ras's admission.

"All I know is the group's name: *Eterusia*," he went on. "I want to put out a request for information."

"You're from Argyll…but you're conducting your investigation in Charlgia?"

Ines looked a little puzzled. Ras nodded.

"That's because these people are after Princess Tishna," he said.

"What?!"

"Can you do that? I'm offering a reward. That's a pretty normal guild job, isn't it?"

"Y-yes, but…if you do that, won't these gentlemen come after you?" Ines looked at Ras, worried. Then something seemed to occur to her, and she gasped. The young lady was smarter than she appeared. She had to be, to handle working with veteran mercenaries like Ras on a daily basis. "That's your plan, isn't it? You want to lure these scoundrels out of hiding, and you're putting your own life on the line to do it!"

"Very perceptive, Miss Ines. I'm aware of the danger I'm putting myself in, but I have little choice at this point."

"B-but…"

Ines cast her eyes left and right nervously, then dropped her gaze and lowered her voice to a whisper.

"I'm not supposed to say this," she said, "but is this related to Princess Tishna's request, by any chance?"

"No. In fact, this is the first I'm hearing of something like that. What do you mean?"

Ras returned the girl's gaze and stared straight into her eyes. Seeing the serious look on his face, Ines was struck dumb for a second before finally finding her words.

"E-er… It's this one," she said, fishing a sheet of paper out of the pile upon her desk. "A request to hire a bodyguard escort. It seems Princess Tishna is planning to entertain guests with some sightseeing during the international summit, and she requested stout and sturdy mercenaries to join her in scouting locations."

"She did?"

Ras took the piece of paper and stared at it. The request had already been fulfilled, which meant the princess and these

mercenaries had already left the city.

"Hold on a second," he said. "Doesn't the castle have guards for this sort of thing? Why would she hire outside help?"

"I-I'm afraid I couldn't say…," stammered Ines, shrinking back at Ras's outburst. Suddenly, Ras stood straight as a troubling premonition came to mind.

"She must be going to Gradage Canyon," he murmured. "Sorry, Miss Ines, but we'll talk about my request some other time."

"O-okay!"

Ines nodded awkwardly, cowed into submission by Ras's aura of urgency. However, Ras didn't have time to worry about her. Princess Tishna had left the city with a group of mercenaries she didn't even know. It was the perfect opportunity for anyone who wanted her dead.

"What the hell are you thinking, Tishna Lumedienne Charlgiana?! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

Ras muttered a curse under his breath and rushed out of the building. How would he explain it to Fiarca if he let the princess get assassinated while he was still scrounging for clues?

"We need to catch up with her as soon as possible. Let's go, Koko."

"Yay! Master's taking me out to play!"

Koko skipped and jumped for joy, looking every bit as childish as her appearance suggested. Her true body had just been standing around in a hangar at the docks for the past few days, so she was surely growing restless.

However, Elmira hurriedly raised an objection.

"Are you taking the *Vildhjärta*, Sir Talion? But we can't launch a Caladrius without express permission from the port officials!"

Even if his equipment had passed customs, air travel was heavily controlled, and it was especially difficult for a foreign Chasseur to be cleared for takeoff. A Caladrius by itself was not much of a military threat, but it could be used to smuggle contraband or perform aerial espionage, so in some ways it was even more dangerous than a regular Chasseur.

Naturally, applying for such permission was not a simple affair, and it could take several days before Ras received a response.

"Don't worry," said Ras, grinning confidently. For some reason, he and Koko shared a knowing glance and nodded to each other.

"We don't need to fly," he said.

5

Princess Tishna Lumedienne Charlgiana was seventeen years old. She possessed the stunningly fair skin and golden hair of her mother, a Lumede national, and was by far the most beautiful among her six sisters. Once, she was known as the Snow-White Tranquility, but it was a long time since anyone used that name. Nowadays, people were more likely to call her the Wicked Princess instead.

Tishna stood at the window, overlooking the gorge below. She was in a fortress at the top of a mountain, adjacent to a natural feature known as the Gradage Canyon. This canyon was important for two reasons: First, it was considered far and wide to be one of the several natural wonders of Danakil. Second, it was the only thing separating Charlgia from the lands beyond, where dangerous fiends roamed.

Tishna had come here with a squadron of mercenaries, to a place with nothing to offer but nature, untouched and unspoiled.

"What scheme are you plotting this time, Your Highness?" asked an aging man behind her.

His name was Girrith Tegnail, otherwise known as Count Tegnail, a subject of the Charlgia Kingdom and one of Princess Tishna's most trusted and important allies.

He came from a long line of military men, and on this occasion, he had found himself accompanying the princess on her selfish whim to visit the canyon, escorted also by his son and other members of the royal army.

Tishna looked over her shoulder at the man and beamed a flowery smile.

"Oh my, Girrith. You make it sound like I'm always up to no good."

"Are you not?"

Girrith heaved a deep sigh. He understood better than anyone else that the princess was not as innocent as she looked.

"What possible reason could bring a princess of Charlgia all the way to the Gradage Canyon, so close to the international summit? And why hire mercenaries on your own coin?"

After a pause, Tishna replied, "I wanted some Hilica fruit," she said.

This caused Girrith to blink in surprise. "H-Hilica fruit, Your Highness?"

"Yes. Gradage is famous for it. But the fruit bruises easily, so it has to be dried before being sent to Barlama."

"Well, I suppose that's true," Girrith muttered.

Hilica was a fruit-bearing tree native to the regions around the canyon. Its fruit had a soft flesh and was the perfect mix of sweet and sour, which made it a popular delicacy. That said, bringing a dozen or so Chasseurs on the journey was undoubtedly overkill.

"At the royal banquet last month, Princess Adelyssa was boasting about a shipment of frozen Hilica, cooled with auramancy, that the Grand Duchy of Agarte sent to her. It's only fair I should get to taste that, too, is it not?"

"You mean to say, Princess, that you brought a small army here just to pick fruit?"

"Why, of course," Tishna replied sweetly. "I didn't want to take any chances. Besides, I can always find more money. I wonder if Marquis Peterka will be interested in an agreement. He's made quite the sum off this little gold smuggling operation of his."

"Your Highness, you wouldn't…"

A sudden chill ran down Girrith's spine.

Public opinion painted Tishna as selfish, malicious, scheming, but never a fool. Girrith and the other aged nobles were constantly

surprised by how the princess seemed to have access to information even they didn't know, and she never failed to put that information to good use.

And yet, quite unlike her power-hungry mother, Tishna had no interest in building up money or influence. Girrith had known her since the princess was quite young, but he could never tell what she was thinking, even now. The only thing he could say about her for sure was that she truly cared for the well-being of her subjects.

While her actions seemed selfish at first glance, they always ended up benefiting her people. Girrith could only thank his lucky stars the princess seemed to be on his side.

And so she had to have some reason for this sudden journey. Just as Girrith swore to find out what it was, a loud alarm echoed throughout the fortress. The mercenaries Tishna had brought with her leaped into action, as did Girrith's men, one of whom ran up to him, out of breath.

"My lord!"

There was little that could faze such a competent aura knight, but Girrith's subordinate looked utterly terrified.

"Compose yourself, man," said Girrith. "You are in the presence of Her Highness."

"A-apologies, sir," said the soldier, kneeling reverently, "but we've just received a shocking report!"

Girrith narrowed his eyes. "What is it?" he asked.

"A dragon, sir."

"I beg your pardon?"

"An aquatic dragon has been sighted by the shores of Lake Voss," the man explained. "Length measures over fifteen meters, sir. Its mere presence is causing stampedes among the nearby fiend population. It's only a matter of time before the chaos reaches us here. We must evacuate at once!"

"A dragon? Preposterous," said Girrith, his voice trembling uncontrollably. "Why now, of all times?"

It wasn’t unusual for dragons to appear in fiend territory, but it was a huge problem if any of them crossed the Gradage Canyon and entered the kingdom. Never in recorded history had a dragon been spotted on this side of the gorge, and as a result, the local garrison was light.

And yet a dragon had seen fit to show up right when the princess was visiting. The timing couldn’t have been any worse.

No, wait…, thought Girrith as he turned toward Princess Tishna, who was standing by the window, staring out at the lands beyond.

It wasn’t that the dragon had coincidentally turned up at the same time as the princess. It was the princess who had turned up at the same time as the dragon.

“Here it is,” she said, without losing her composure in the slightest. “Count Tegnail, round up all the mercenaries I employed. Tell them if they have a Chasseur, they are to engage the rampaging fiends immediately. Thin the herds as much as possible before they reach civilization.”

Humans weren’t the only creatures afraid of dragons. Fiends living in the vicinity fled in terror at its approach. Some of those would flee in the direction of the kingdom, toward human settlements. It was that which Tishna wanted to avoid.





“Any who do not,” the princess went on, “tell them they are to defend the people. They may take any measures required to prevent looting and chaos, with the express permission of Princess Tishna Lumedienne Charlgiana.”

“Y-you heard her,” said Girrith. “Go tell the mercenaries.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

A little bewildered, the subordinate rushed off. Felling a dragon was a tall order for any mercenary, but they could handle ordinary fiends just fine. It looked like Tishna’s own private army was going to see action after all.

“What about the Tegnail house’s Chasseurs?” she asked.

“We have one custom model, Your Highness, as well as three standard issues,” said Girrith through gritted teeth. “I fear it will not be enough to even slow down a dragon.”

In times of peace, four Chasseurs were more than enough to provide a royal escort, but that number fell woefully short against such a powerful fiend.

However, Tishna smiled and shook her head.

“That will serve well,” she said. “Order them to target the wyrms and lesser wyverns serving the beast. Have them try not to interfere in the battle with the dragon. Can you do that?”

“Y-yes, if that is all you require,” said Girrith, still confused. “But what do you mean? Who will be fighting the dragon?”

Princess Tishna had no aptitude for auramancy. She couldn’t even ride a Chasseur. And none of the older models stationed at this fortress would stand a chance against a dragon. Even if the royal capital sent reinforcements, they would take at least half a day to arrive, and there were no other armies or garrisons nearby. In a word, it was hopeless.

And yet Tishna smiled, as though she were enjoying herself.

“My Prince Charming,” she said. “Who better to slay a dragon and rescue a princess?”

6

By the time Ras arrived in Gradage, the forests around the canyon were in chaos. A great battle was unfolding between a group of Chasseurs and endless hordes of fiends. The fiends seemed to be fleeing in a panic, with the Chasseurs trying to hold them off. Privateer units made up the bulk of the forces, which meant they most likely belonged to the mercenaries Princess Tishna had brought with her from the capital.

"What the hell is going on here?!"

Spotting a lone Chasseur surrounded by foes, Ras moved to assist. The mercenary unit was up against a horde of ferocious, midsize fiends called Wolflizards. Usually, these intelligent creatures attacked in packs, but right now they were too crazed to utilize proper teamwork. Ras didn't even draw his sword—he flew toward one and sent it flying with a punch, before using auramancy to burn another to ash. That gave the privateer unit time to recover, after which they eliminated the fiend in front of them using their two-handed sword.

"You all right over there?!" Ras yelled across the radio comms.

"All good. Thanks for your help, stranger."

The jockey's voice was ragged with exhaustion. He seemed to realize Ras had just saved his life, and was too grateful to question his appearance or motives.

"You're with the guild in Charlgia, right? What happened here?" Ras asked.

"It's a stampede. A dragon showed up on the shores of Lake Voss. Sent all the fiends into a frenzy."

"Did you say a dragon?!" cried Ras in astonishment. He'd been expecting to have to rescue Tishna from assassins, but this was one outcome he hadn't predicted.

"Yeah. Princess Tishna ordered us to keep the fiends away from civilization."

"So the princess *did* come here. Where is she now?"

"No idea. But she hasn't come this way. She's probably still in the fortress at Gradage Canyon. Maybe she's planning on fighting the dragon herself."

"What? That doesn't make sense…"

Ras felt dizzy. The princess had *just so happened* to visit Gradage Canyon on the very day a dragon appeared. And she *just so happened* to bring a squad of mercenaries with her to fight off the rampaging fiends. There was such a thing as coincidence, but this was far beyond that. There was only one possible explanation—Princess Tishna had somehow known the dragon would appear.

But how? Even auramancy was incapable of predicting the future. There was no way Princess Tishna could acquire knowledge of events that hadn't happened yet.

"A dragon? Fighting a dragon? Are we going to kill it?"

Ras heard the voice of the *Vildhjärta*—Koko's voice—which snapped him back to reality. Whatever strange powers the princess possessed, they were of no importance now. There was a dragon, and that meant there was only one thing to do: slay it. Ras was a disciple of the Black Blade, and that compelled him to rise to this task, even if it got him mixed up in Princess Tishna's enigmatic schemes.

"Yes, we are, Koko," he said, a ferocious smile on his lips. "It doesn't matter if it's a dragon or a group of assassins, our job is to protect Fiarca's wife."

"Okay. We're going to kill a dragon."

Ras swore he felt the *Vildhjärta*'s core swell with joy. The jet-black Chasseur began spewing aurons like fire, and the next moment, the Chasseur started to transform.

◇◇◇◇

Over at the fortress, Count Tegnail and the fort garrison were frantically swapping orders over the wireless, desperately trying to understand the situation. They had already sent out every available

Chasseur, and any leftover aura knights and mages were busy manning the citadel's defenses.

However, no matter how many of the lesser fiends they exterminated, the dragon remained a persistent threat.

"Princess, we've wiped out the bulk of the fiends," reported Girrith, his expression grave, "but we won't be able to withstand a direct attack from the aquatic dragon. We must take shelter in the fortress cellar at once."

But the princess remained unsettlingly calm.

"Come now, Girrith," she said with a smile. "There's no need for that." Her beautiful azure eyes, as clear and serene as a cloudless sky, remained fixed on a long-range observation aura device, through which she viewed the approaching dragon with as little concern as she would a mere play. "It looks like he's finally arrived," she said.

"He? Whom do you mean?"

Girrith furrowed his brow quizzically. Then, all of a sudden, his eyes shot wide. Standing directly in the path of the calamitous fiend was a jet-black figure. A beast of steel, clad in a crimson glow.

"A Managarmr?!" came the fearful voice of one of the citadel's sentries. A Managarmr was a mythical creature spoken of in old Telosian legends. It was a jet-black wolf with flaming wings that crossed the heavens, devoured the moon, and stained the sun and sky in blood.

The machine that just landed in the Gradage Canyon looked exactly the same.

"What is that?!" barked Girrith, his voice hoarse. "Is that a Chasseur, or an omen of death?!"

It was clear to the eye that the coat of this "Managarmr" was made up of aurons, so the mysterious machine had to be a Chasseur. A Chasseur that flew on crimson wings.

In addition to possessing the airspeed of a Caladrius, the Chasseur took a bestial form, such that even on ground, it could move much

faster than a normal unit. The mysterious Chasseur bolted toward the dragon at incredible speed.

However, the true surprise was yet to come. Before the astonished eyes of Girrith and the other fortress guards, the bestial Chasseur rose up on its hind legs and, with nary a sound, slipped smoothly into a different shape.

"The Managarmr! It walks like a man!" cried one of Girrith's men. The count was shocked utterly speechless.

In truth, Chasseurs that could shapeshift were not completely unheard of. Charlgia was said to possess a unit by the name of *Haüyne*, which could alter parts of itself, and the Registani *Centodieci* could even transform into a wyvern. However, even the veteran Girrith had never seen one with such an unsettling appearance.

"Madness! Does it mean to confront the beast alone?" came another cry from the men. No matter how mighty a single Chasseur, it was no match for a dragon. That was more than common sense; it was a rule of nature. An aura barrage by a platoon of top-class auramancers would fall apart before it even reached a dragon's scales, which were hard enough to deflect a Chasseur's sword. In terms of both speed and power, a single Chasseur was outmatched.

And yet the jet-black Chasseur was winning in its fight against the raging dragon. It employed auramancy glamours to slow the beast's movements, while adjusting its tactics on the fly. With pinpoint precision and bladework, it aimed for the few weak points all dragons shared: the unprotected eyes and ears, as well as the horns, which were responsible for generating its aura-repulsing field.

The overwhelming speed and strength of this jet-black Chasseur was almost enough to occlude the pilot's raw skill, rendering his exceptional talent invisible to all but the most keen-eyed observers.

"Unbelievable! Who could possibly pilot a machine of that magnitude?"

Girrith shook uncontrollably. He couldn't think of a single man or woman in all the kingdom with that level of ability.

Yet even that was no assurance of victory against the dragon. No matter how many times the two opponents clashed, the Chasseur was still far from dealing a lethal blow. Meanwhile, each attack by the dragon backed its mechanical foe farther and farther into a corner. While the pitch-black Chasseur seemed at first glance to be dominating the fight, in truth it walked a delicate tightrope, and one mistake would spell its doom.

"To think a single unit was capable of such things. But even so…"

Girrith felt powerless to prevent what was coming. No matter how great a Chasseur's energy stores, they were not infinite. Sooner or later, the jet-black unit would run dry, though its performance would surely drop enough to allow a decisive strike long before that.

Girrith longed for an army, but another half dozen, or even just one unit of the same class as this jet-black enigma, would be enough to tip the scales.

Yet there was nothing. All he could do was sit back and twiddle his thumbs. It was humiliating.

"All is well, Girrith," Princess Tishna whispered, in a voice so free of doubt it was like she could see the future.

Girrith turned to her in shock. "Well, you say?! The power of that fiend approaches that of a Greater Dragon!"

"That is to say it is weaker than a Greater Dragon, is it not? If so, then it poses little threat to our Prince Charming. Just watch."

Tishna smiled as sweetly as a child. Upon the monitor her auramancy conjured, the jet-black Chasseur dodged another one of the aquatic dragon's strikes before leaping into the sky. Though it was still far from death, the fiend had lost torrents of blood, and its movements were growing slow. The jet-black Chasseur raised its sword and aimed a swing at the dragon's neck.

A dragon's scales and its repellant force field were dense enough to deflect any weapon, but if that weapon were clad in a coating of aurons even denser…

"An Over Art?!"

The citadel's garrison watched in astonishment as the jet-black Chasseur's sword sliced through the dragon's neck as easily as snapping a twig. Amid their horrified silence, Tishna muttered quietly to herself.

"The Black Arts. Splendidly done, Ras."

Then the earth rumbled as the slain beast fell, and the citadel erupted into joyous cheers.

EPILOGUE

Looks like I was too slow, Ras thought.

The plan had been to slay the dragon and beat a swift retreat immediately afterward, but an unexpected turn of events had thrown a wrench in the works.

The *Vildhjärta* had run out of aurons. Gradage Canyon was 450 kilometers from Barlama. It would take an ordinary Chasseur moving at top speed with no breaks over four hours to cross that distance, but in its Managarmr form, the *Vildhjärta* had reached its destination in less than sixty minutes. Factoring in that Ras had gone straight from traveling that distance to battling the dragon, it was easy to understand where all his reserves went. The cherry on top was the Black Art he had used to seal the dragon's fate. Thanks to that, the *Vildhjärta* had entered shutdown.

The downside to the *Vildhjärta*'s auron-guzzling engine was that it required quite a bit of time to regain mobility. It was one weakness Ras had neglected to consider. Even so, it only accounted for three minutes or so of downtime, but nevertheless, the princess was able to use that time to order her mercenary Chasseurs to surround Ras and cut off his escape, almost as though she had known the whole course of events from start to finish.

Now Princess Tishna stood alone before the *Vildhjärta*, with no guards or even servants by her side. As Ras dismounted his Chasseur, she gazed at him as though looking at an old friend.

"Are you the rider of this Chasseur?" she asked.

Ras kneeled before the princess, silently taking stock of her. Princess Tishna was every bit as fetching as the stories claimed. If Fiarca's features were carved meticulously out of silver, then Tishna's were miraculously formed in crystal ice. She was wearing a simple, military-style dress and almost no jewelry at all. It was a style that required a lot of confidence to pull off, which, in the princess's case, was clearly well founded, for her plain appearance did nothing to detract from her dignified air.

"I am Princess Tishna Lumedienne Charlgiana, fourth royal princess of the Charlgia Kingdom," she said, pinching the hem of her skirt and curtsying. "I thank you for your much-needed assistance in handling this dragon threat."

Her behavior would have looked strongly amiss amid the blood-soaked battlefield, were it not for the aura of purity she seemed to engender with her very being. Ras couldn't help feeling he was dealing with a formidable woman indeed.

"You honor this unworthy servant with your kind and gracious words, Your Royal Highness," replied Ras, keeping his head down. As far as he wanted to let on, he was Taras Kaylian, a humble foreign mercenary of no import. Not many mercenaries possessed custom Chasseurs, but a few of them did, and the *Vildhjärta*, with its understated paint job, didn't look like the unit of a nobleman. Ras was confident it wouldn't arouse suspicion.

This confidence was immediately undermined by the princess's words.

"Your humility is greatly misplaced, Ras Talion Veredica, son of Count Veredica. Not many men in the Argyll Empire claim the title of Guardian of Silver."

"…?!"

Ras froze, a knot forming in his throat. The princess had seen through every last one of his lies. Her accusation even disturbed the mercenaries standing around her.

"A Guardian of Silver?! That's why he possesses such a terrifying Chasseur!"

"Wait, did you say Ras Talion? The Stallion himself, here in Charlgia?!"

"I heard he single-handedly broke up an entire smuggling ring just to sleep with the boss's wife!"

"I heard women get pregnant just from coming within a sword's length of him! Keep him far away from the princess!"

Almost forgetting they were in the presence of royalty, the mercenaries started spouting off whatever ridiculous rumors they'd heard. Ras appeared weary as he realized his notoriety had spread to the neighboring kingdoms. The princess appeared to be trying not to laugh, so a stern-faced man by her side spoke up in her place. He appeared to be the princess's chaperone, and while he seemed a little old for active service, he nonetheless possessed the piercing eyes of a soldier.

"I am Count Girrith Tegnail of the Charlgia Kingdom," he said. "What brings you to our fair nation, Sir Talion?"

"I've been sent by the crown prince," Ras admitted. "My orders are to protect Princess Tishna."

"Protect her from what, pray tell?"

"Assassins," Ras answered truthfully. "We have reports that a group from within the empire is plotting against Her Royal Highness."

In terms of Argyll's national interests, it was best to keep this information secret, but it would be a lot easier to keep the princess safe if she knew of the danger she was in.

"I see," said Girrith. "That explains why you came to the kingdom to investigate."

Although it hadn't been revealed to the public yet, officials of both countries had been planning the marriage between Auriol and Tishna for months. It therefore came as no surprise to Girrith that the empire would send a Guardian of Silver to ensure the princess's safety.

"I hope you understand why I had to enter your country on false pretenses," said Ras. "If my true mission came to light, it could spell

trouble for both our nations."

With that, he rose to his feet. Since his identity was out, Ras no longer had to act like a commoner. Plus, he was always planning on introducing himself to the princess sooner or later. His other mission was to win her heart, and Ras decided the best way to do that was to be open and honest.

"Quite right," said Tishna. "I think in light of your deeds here today, we can overlook an indiscretion like that."

The princess shot Ras a suggestive smile, then suddenly her expression grew grave.

"However," she said, "that does not change the fact that you have broken the law. You are to leave this country at once, do you understand? Take that Chasseur of yours and be gone from our kingdom by tomorrow."

"What?!" gasped Ras.

"Y-Your Highness, you can't…" Girrith's voice quivered with shock.

"Didn't you hear me? You're in danger!"

"I gave you an order, Talion. Or we can take your objections to the royal palace, if you prefer?"

Ras stared into the princess's eyes, but they were cold and dispassionate. He held her gaze for a few seconds, then turned away.

"Very well," he said. "I'll do as you wish."

"Of course you will," said Princess Tishna, smiling. Ras couldn't fathom what she was thinking, but if she was confident she could fend off the assassination attempt by herself, then there wasn't much Ras could say to change her mind.

Ras sighed and began making his way back to the *Vildhjärta*. However, just then Princess Tishna suddenly called out to him once more.

"Oh, there's one thing I forgot to ask," she said. "Sir Talion, could you look right here for me?"

"Hmm?"

Tishna indicated her right eye and began walking toward Ras. Utterly bewildered, he did as she asked, and the very next second Princess Tishna grabbed his head with both hands, stood up on her tiptoes, and pulled him in for a kiss.

Girrith's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets, and a curious murmur rippled through the mercenaries. While Ras stood there, frozen, the princess smiled.

"This is my thanks to you for protecting the people of this land," she said. "I'm glad I got to meet you *once more*, right at the very end."

◇◇◇◇

"Are you sure it was wise, letting that man go?" asked a disgruntled Girrith on the way back to the mountaintop fortress. He had been wearing a permanent frown ever since the princess kissed Ras right before his eyes.

"Have I ever had an unwise idea?" the princess answered playfully, tracing her lips with a finger.

"Well, no, but…"

Girrith couldn't think what to say. No matter how reckless and ill-advised the princess's schemes seemed at first glance, they always worked out in the end. Nobody understood that more than Girrith.

Yet, he found himself doubting Princess Tishna's latest decree. This was a matter of life and death for her. There were no doubts regarding Ras's skill, and if he was brought into the fold, Charlgia would gain access to Argyll's intelligence network as well. On top of that, Princess Tishna herself seemed exceedingly fond of the man, considering it was the first time the two had met. He couldn't begin to understand why she had proceeded to turn him away.





"This is the way it must be, Count Tegnail."

The truth was, if it was up to her, she would love to keep Ras by her side, but she couldn't. She had to push him away.

Because if Ras stayed with her, he would have to protect her.

Lowering her voice to a whisper, Tishna spoke words that only she could hear.

"Princess Tishna Lumedienne Charlgia will be struck down by cruel assassins," she said. "This is one fate that cannot—must not—be changed. *I will not make the same mistake again.*"

The setting sun dyed the world in the color of blood and cast long shadows across a lone princess's cheek.



BONUS TALE The Melancholy of a Cross-Dressing Princess

The mirror spanning one wall showed two women. The first was a noble lady with violet eyes and silver hair. Thought by all to be dead, she was the princess of the Argyll Empire, Fiarca Jeva Argenteia. Behind the seated Fiarca stood another silver-haired girl who looked exactly the same. This was Elmira Almathe, an agent raised from birth to act as the princess's body double.

The two of them were in Prouss, in a safe house used by the imperial family. Fiarca had left the imperial palace in secret to carry out a particular mission—an important task only the princess herself could handle.

Elmira was here to help Fiarca dress. This role was usually filled by Shishka, but the servant girl was unable to leave the palace. Fiarca rarely put care or attention into her appearance, but today Elmira was brushing her hair, and just a modicum of makeup altered her looks quite drastically. Elmira was used to it by now, but still she sighed at how far the Silver Bloom's looks exceeded her own. A replica could never match the real thing.

And yet Fiarca seemed dissatisfied as she stared at her own reflection. She turned and asked her double a question.

"Elmira, do you think I look cute?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Elmira, her hand holding the brush halting. "Is that supposed to be some kind of secret code, Your Highness?"

Fiarca puffed out her cheeks like a child. In turn, Elmira only grew more confused. She sincerely could not fathom why the princess had said such a thing. Fiarca was a proud and confident princess, with wisdom and intellect to match. She was the last person Elmira would ever expect to harbor doubts over her own beauty. To say nothing of the fact that Fiarca was so blessed with good looks that only a blind fool could ever claim she wasn't cute.

Yet Elmira said none of this. Instead, she bowed her head and spoke meekly.

"I am sorry, Your Highness. I just did not expect you to talk like that."

"Well, I suppose the days of worrying about my appearance are long over," said Fiarca, casting a bittersweet gaze at the metal mask lying on a desk nearby.

It was the mask she had been forced to wear ever since assuming the identity of her fallen brother. Indeed, with it on, she had little need to concern herself with beauty.

"Have the imperial guards been speaking ill of you again, Your Highness? Have they been saying things like your face was your only redeeming quality, or the inside didn't match the outside, or that your bust could have stood to be a little larger, or…?"

If so, Elmira could see how that could cause the princess to lose confidence. However, her words caused Fiarca to frown and glare at her through the mirror.

"Are you sure those are the thoughts of the Imperial Guard, Elmira, and not your own?" she grumbled. "It's not that. It's just that sometimes I wonder. When people speak of Princess Fiarca, they call her the Silver Bloom, or the most beautiful woman in the realm, or an angel descended from heaven. How much of that is objectively true?"

"Ah, I see," said Elmira knowingly. "You used to grow bigheaded off these compliments, but now you're starting to wonder if they were all just flattery."

"I haven't been growing bigheaded!" Fiarca protested. "But in the eyes of the public, I am dead. Humans have a tendency to view the past through rose-tinted spectacles, and no one would dare speak ill of the deceased, would they?"

"That is true."

"And even when I was alive, people feared insulting the imperial princess. I've always wanted to know, from a neutral viewpoint, are my looks really so remarkable?"

Fiarca's tone calmed as she returned to her conundrum. Ever since her "death," Fiarca's subjects had lamented the loss of her legendary good looks. Fiarca herself, meanwhile, wondered if the rumors had not simply grown out of hand. The only person she could speak about her doubts frankly with was Elmira. However, the silver-haired agent simply shook her head sadly.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that I cannot answer that."

"Why not?" asked Fiarca, pouting. "I'm not going to have you executed, you know."

And yet Elmira's reservations were understandable. Even if the two were good friends, Elmira was a mere servant; she had no right to insult the princess's appearance. However, Elmira had no intention of doing that at all.

"That is not the reason," she said.

"Then why?"

"Have you forgotten, Your Highness? We look the same, you and I. I cannot possibly give you a neutral opinion on this matter."

"I suppose that's true."

Convinced, Fiarca left it at that. Elmira was raised as the princess's double, so there was more than a passing resemblance between them. Any judgment she passed on Fiarca's beauty was bound to be influenced by that fact.

"However, I do not think you have anything to be worried about, Your Highness. You might not know this, but several men have taken a keen interest in me."

"What, they have?"

Fiarca's eyes went wide.

"Yes," Elmira replied. "And since we look so similar, I do not doubt many people think the same way about you."

"I don't care about that anymore! What's all this about men being into you? You've never told me that before! Why did you drop that so casually?!"

"Because it's true."

"Well, don't stop there, for crying out loud! Tell me more!"

Elmira sighed.

"A few of the men around the court have expressed their affections," she said matter-of-factly. "The sons of Baron Clarki and Viscount Zelenoi, for example. Recently, Chief Adviser Tory of Central Command has been sending me gifts as well."

"Those men, they've got some nerve, making passes at the crown prince's lover at her own place of work. Did they come to the palace just to fool around?"

Fiarca's pretty lips curled into a scowl, and she grumbled under her breath. In order to allow the woman to enter and leave the crown prince's quarters as she pleased without raising suspicion, Fiarca had let slip the rumor that Elmira and Auriol shared an intimate relationship. It wasn't great for Elmira's reputation, but it did the job, and as an order from her employer, she couldn't well refuse.

"Besides, don't I know Tory from when we went through the academy together?" said Fiarca. "He never showed any interest in me, so why is he suddenly so taken by you?"

Grumbling to herself, Fiarca ran her eyes over Elmira's body, finally landing on the woman's bust. It was the one distinguishing point even an amateur's eye could pick out. To put it plainly, Elmira's was bigger.

"Grrr… That must be it. Men truly do like them large." She spoke through gritted teeth.

Even though she possessed a face most women would die to obtain, Fiarca's scant curves were her one point of shame. It wasn't

something Elmira had given too much consideration, but Fiarca apparently found it quite vexing.

"I wouldn't say there's that big a difference," said Elmira. "Besides, I daresay it works in your favor when disguising your gender. I've had to do it before, and let me tell you that wearing a tight corset is quite painful with breasts like mine."

"I'd appreciate it if you could lay off the false modesty," Fiarca retorted. "If you're trying to make me feel better, it isn't working."

"I really do feel like something must have happened, Your Highness. You've never cared this much before about what others think of you."

"Well, you can hardly blame me. I'm about to speak to Ras for the first time in two years, and I must convince him to help us."

Fiarca lowered her gaze to her lap and sighed.

"I see," whispered Elmira. "Ras Talion Veredica, son of Count Veredica."

Following the untimely death of Crown Prince Auriol, Fiarca had chosen to fake her identity and manage the empire in his place. The deception had been proceeding smoothly until marriage talks surfaced concerning Auriol and Princess Tishna of the neighboring Charlgia Kingdom. Fiarca may have been a cunning schemer, but even she couldn't keep her true gender a secret throughout all the rigors and duties of marriage.

And so, as a last resort, she turned to her former fiancé, Ras Talion Veredica. If he could win over the princess on her behalf, then Fiarca's secret could remain hidden. As a bonus, their union would provide the empire with a clear successor, too.

However, if Ras refused to help, then both the empire and the kingdom were in trouble. In the worst case, imperial nobles might be emboldened to stage a coup, and the whole realm could descend into civil war.

"Securing Ras's cooperation is of the utmost importance," Fiarca said, "and yet there is very little we can offer him in return. The

reality is, we must pin our hopes on his love for me—if any still remains."

"How can it not?" asked Elmira. "You two were engaged, were you not?"

But Fiarca shook her head sadly.

"Until two years ago, perhaps. But Ras ceased being my fiancé when my death was announced. Perhaps he has forgotten all about me."

"That is hard to imagine," Elmira reassured her. "After all, it was to heal the wounds caused by your loss that he drowned his sorrows at the pleasure-houses."

"Maybe in the beginning," Fiarca replied, "but you are aware, aren't you, of the truth behind ParadiasH, Ras's favorite brothel?"

"That it is owned and operated by Fon Cigel, the Black Blade, under the auspices of the emperor, you mean? Supposedly, the staff are all trained aura knights who take on mercenary jobs in secret."

"Yes, that's right," said Fiarca with a bitter expression.

The world knew Ras as the Stallion, a man lost to women and vice, but that wasn't quite the case. Somehow, he had ended up a student of the Black Blade and been pressured into undertaking all kinds of jobs for Fon under the guise of "training."

Still, that didn't mean Ras didn't take advantage of the services on offer while he was there. ParadiasH was home to some of the finest ladies whose company money could buy.

"But the real problem is, how are there so many pretty girls working there?! It's ridiculous! There's more than all the leading ladies in every acting troupe in Vif Arger combined!"

"Well, that's why they call it the greatest brothel in all of Prouss."

"And it's not just their faces, either; some of those girls have the biggest melons I've ever seen! It's no wonder Ras couldn't tear himself away; he probably couldn't even move for them!"

With tears in her eyes, Fiarca directed a rotten glare at Elmira. Her words were hyperbole, of course, but the fact remained that the ladies of ParadiasH possessed figures that put Fiarca's to shame.

"Well, some gentlemen care less for the melon and more for the thin slice of prosciutto that is placed atop it."

"Who are you calling prosciutto?! I'm not that flat, I'll have you know!"

Elmira had meant to cheer the princess up, but it seemed her careless words were not to Fiarca's liking. She let out a weary sigh, one that did not escape Fiarca's keen notice.

"I bet you were just thinking, 'What's this got to do with me?,' weren't you?"

"I wouldn't go that far. I was merely thinking what a moody little brat you are."

"That's way worse!"

"If it troubles you so, why not take it up with Lady Kanalayka instead? She will be the one accompanying you on this mission, will she not?"

Kanalayka Aluarche, first legate, was said to be the most skilled aura knight in the Imperial Guard. As the princess's bodyguard, she would be meeting Ras alongside Fiarca. She would have made for a much better ear to Fiarca's complaints than Elmira, who would be filling the princess's shoes at the imperial palace.

However, when Elmira suggested this, the princess looked obviously downcast.

"That's precisely the problem," she said.

"Hmm?"

Elmira was confused. Kanalayka was one of the few close confidants who knew Fiarca's secret. Fiarca herself even frequently praised the woman's loyalty and dedication. The princess was behaving very strange today, acting timid around people she usually accepted. It was almost as though she was afraid of the legate for some reason.

"Kanalayka is a pretty girl; even I can see that," said Fiarca. "And she's got better hips than me, and she can talk to Ras about aura knight things, and she's hardworking, and she doesn't know how to

say no, and she doesn't have all the baggage I have. What will I do if Ras prefers her over me?"

At the end, Fiarca's voice grew so quiet it was almost imperceptible. This was the true cause of Fiarca's sudden insecurity. This was the real reason she was worrying about her looks and the size of her bust. She was worried Kanalayka was going to steal Ras away from her.

Kanalayka Aluarche was indeed an attractive woman. There was no doubt that, if she tried, she could have any man her heart desired. But she was also unshakably loyal to her mistress, Fiarca. It was impossible to imagine any circumstance that would cause her to betray that trust.

Fiarca obviously knew this as well, yet she couldn't shake her worry. It was a fear that logic could not placate, because despite everything, Fiarca was still in love with Ras.

"You need not worry, Your Highness. You are plenty cute yourself."

Saying this, Elmira wrapped her arms around the princess from behind. She could scarcely believe that Princess Fiarca, a woman so smart and wise when it came to politics, and so well versed in the art of scheming, could be reduced to such an awkward sight when it came to matters of romance.

"Oh, Elmira…… Are you sure you're not just saying that to shut me up?"

"I am not," said Elmira with a smile. "You are beyond charming, Your Highness, and I am sure Ras Talion thinks so as well."

When she thought of what was to come, Elmira was a little saddened. Ras's mission was to seduce a princess of the neighboring country. If Ras succeeded in his task, then Princess Tishna would become Fiarca's romantic rival. If Kanalayka was already causing her this much stress, she shuddered to think what life would be like after a member of Charlgian royalty was added into the mix.

Would she pretend nothing was wrong on the face of it, and in secret complain to Elmira every day like she was doing now? If that

was what it came to, Elmira thought, then she supposed hearing out the princess's troubles was the least she could do.

Because she was the shadow that walked alongside her mistress, and she accepted her, warts and all.





Afterword

Hello again. Or perhaps, for the first time. Pleased to meet you. My name is Gakuto Mikumo, and this is the first volume of my latest work, *Sword of the Stallion*!

This is an edited version of a work that was first published under the same name on the web-publishing site Kakuyomu by the official Dengeki Bunko account. Originally, it was just a little side project of mine, but when my editor caught sight of it, he graciously offered to run it by the company, and now with their approval, I can finally bring it to you in book form.

With its origins being what they are, I'm afraid that this work was not written with marketing in mind, and as a result, the author's personal inclinations are on full display. Hence the giant robots created with lost technology doing battle with dragons; or the pair of scheming princesses; and our hapless protagonist trapped between them. It was just me writing what I wanted because I felt like it.

I started writing this work with no hopes that it would ever be published in paperback format, so at the moment, I'm quite overwhelmed with all the work that entails, on top of my original web-publishing schedule. However, if it brings my lovely blackhearted heroines to even a few more readers, then it's all worth it. Princess Tishna is already causing mayhem in the web version, and there are several short stories that can only be read there. If it takes your fancy, please feel free to read and support that version as well!

In addition, the fifth volume of my other concurrent series, *Hollow Regalia*, has just gone on sale. The story is quickly advancing upon the climax, so please give it a read if you have the chance. It is also receiving a manga adaptation by the kind folks at Dengeki Maoh. Matsuki Ugatsu is handling the art, and even amid the brutal setting, their adorable depictions of the girls shine through! I wholeheartedly recommend it.

Finally, the illustrations this time are being handled by Manyako, who also worked on my previous series, *Strike the Blood*. I am eternally grateful for your hearty cooperation amid such a busy schedule. It's a pleasure and an honor to be working together once more. To everyone else who worked on this book and assisted in its distribution, I extend my humblest thanks. And, of course, a great big thank-you to all you lovely readers who picked it up. I hope we can meet again in the next one.

Gakuto Mikumo

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink